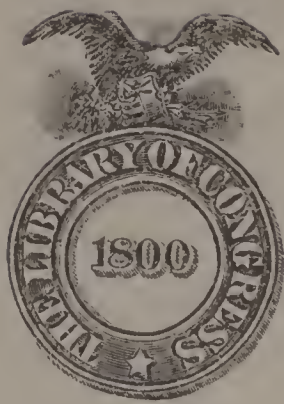


LETTERS OF AN  
UNSUCCESSFUL  
ACTOR















Letters of An Unsuccessful Actor





LETTERS OF AN  
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ACTOR

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## FOREWORD

The letters printed in the following pages will, I believe, explain themselves. Whether their appeal is sufficiently vital to form a public time alone can prove, but I have often felt that there was matter in them that might be of general interest. I asked the consent of my Correspondent to publish them, and his reply, of which I quote a part, is characteristic of his whole attitude during our correspondence ; he says :—

“ By all means, publish if it will amuse you—and you can find a publisher sufficiently adventurous. But don’t forget that I wrote for your eyes alone and that our talks on paper have had the advantage for our mutual understanding of a very real sympathy which a stranger must lack. I could never *seek* publication ; firstly, because I have no literary graces, and secondly, because I know myself more truthful than discreet. I trust you, then, to edit, to compress and to eliminate however and whenever may seem good to you, but please don’t print my name ! It would have no weight anyhow, for very few people know me—even among those who possibly may think they do—and the interest, if interest there be, is in the matter and by no means in the writer. If I may suggest—and if that amiable publisher is ever found—I recommend that you should call the volume *Letters of an Unsuccessful Actor* and risk the obvious critical comment—and, for Heaven’s sake, don’t print the title in inverted commas.”

Following my friend's suggestion I have made a selection and edited—perhaps a little less than he would have wished. I have compressed sometimes, and I have eliminated only where the matter seemed too personal for general interest or where violence of expression might jar the casual reader who failed to detect the humorous intention which I knew underlay his words. For the rest I leave him to speak for himself hoping that others may find as I have amusement in his sometimes curious angle of observation and somewhat bizarre attitude towards various Arts and conventions and particularly towards the modern Theatre.

R. M. S.

York.

*April, 1923.*

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## LETTER I

London

2nd June, 1918.

My dear Redgie——Yes, I insist upon spelling you as you are pronounced. Not that you *are* pronounced, for a less didactic person I never encountered ; didactic, be it well understood, in the aggressive sense. I know you have opinions and the strength of purpose to respect your own judgment when you have formed it on good evidence, as every one should. Wobbly opinions in regard to the great facts of life are the first cause of loose action, indeterminate thought and inevitable failure. So you shall not be vitelline Reggie, but Redgie of the keen edge.

My curiosity was at the fever point before our first meeting and was tempered in no sense by our host's report on you at the breakfast table. "Redgie's a sport!" he said. From him this did not suggest what the banal phrase usually implies. It meant, probably, no more than that you had advised illuminatingly as to the rearrangement of the pictures in his study. After our month's acquaintance I know that he could have had no better adviser.

I write simply because I want to continue our conversations. We managed to discuss so many subjects without disagreeing—thanks to your admirable tact—that I feel it more profitable to discuss Nothing in Particular with you than most things with anyone else.

Of course if this should become a long letter I shall arrive at Shakespeare, even though I start with Lloyd George, Christian Science or *Chu-Chin-Chow*; but to-day I feel like tackling neither. I write because I want to hear from you. You are sure to say something that will provoke me to *tirade*; and in imagination I shall see that



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

patient and critical smile which invariably accompanies the corrective logic of your comment. If you mention Sauchiehall Street I shall think of Cranston's horrible tea-shop or that furniture-dealer's window that, as I told you, reminded me of Irving's productions at the Lyceum; the perfection of taste expressed with the maximum of richness and the minimum of obtrusiveness; the only setting for Shakes— ——— What did I tell you?

You are back at home now, with your Mother and Sister, and I imagine the welcome you have received. No such vulgarity as "the fattened calf," I am sure. I remember that you don't like veal—nor *coffee*! There you miss one of the chief joys of life. But from what you have told me of the exploits of the admirable Mason, I am satisfied that a suitable repast celebrated the event. You used to jeer at me in Glasgow on account of my gastronomical idiosyncrasies. I admit I am a faddist; very lean years, and many of them, never reconciled me to gross food. Even the days when as a super I starved on nine shillings a week in the cause of Art did not vitiate the sensitiveness of my palate; and I remember distinctly a day many years later when a friend (who is now a Star in America) generously gave me, at Roche's little restaurant in Old Compton Street, the first dinner I had had for ten days, I could not resist criticising adversely the Tripe and Onions which formed the *pièce de résistance*. But you detest the subject of food and the above will merely evoke some contemptuous gibe—even if you condescend to notice it.

I hope your Mother will not think your visit to the City of Dreadful Knights has done you harm. Your presence in the house party was inestimable. It is a peculiarly difficult thing for a professional actor to produce a Company



## LETTER NUMBER ONE

of amateurs—unless he has the Social Manner, to which I do not pretend. I treated them exactly as I should have treated professionals. It is true that none of our amateurs had technique, whereas in a professional Company one may find two or three who have some slight knowledge of it. Oh, yes, I can see your quizzical smile and hear you calling me a soured and disappointed Old Pro. who can find no good on the modern stage. I have sometimes felt that is true. Then I do a round of the theatres and it generally happens that I find something at last to give me new hope and faith in the Drama's future. But the average to-day is deplorably low. One wonders if it was ever lower; and out of my own recollection I can answer Yes; for I believe it touched bottom at the time of the Ibsen craze in the early Nineties. Pinero produced *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* in 1893, and who will say that Ibsen's influence had nothing to do with that? I don't mean the theme, but the method. Later, I remember—I think it was during the run of *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* at the Garrick—I was at a big dinner at the Cecil with John Hare in the Chair, and in his speech he said: "Better a wine-glass of Pinero than a tumblerful of Ibsen." I remarked to my neighbour: "Pour a wine-glass of Ibsen into a tumbler and fill up with water and you have Pinero." This was possibly unjust and certainly unkind—the more so because it contained the elements of truth.

But in those days the few who appreciated Ibsen were a fighting minority, and, believe me, we had much to fight. I have noted some amusing *volte-faces* on the subject on the part of certain gentlemen of the Press in the past quarter of a century.

But in the early Nineties Pinero's really fine play was epoch-making; it was the start of a new era; the era of

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the Playwright, who from that time ousted the Actor from the place of first importance in the Theatre. Thenceforward Acting, as I understand it, has steadily deteriorated.

Acting is properly the Art of Impersonation but Pinero would have none of that. He chose his cast for their personal idiosyncrasies; he banished make-up and all that it implies. The bald-pated uncle of fifty-five must be played by the bald-pated actor of fifty-five; the paunch must be the actor's own; the pimply youth must appear upon the stage with the pimples inflicted upon him by nature.

Modern dramatists and producers have adopted Pinero's method and cast plays on the same lines thereby creating a tremendous influx to the profession, for Types have been sought far and wide, who, often after two or three engagements only have gone to swell the growing ranks of the unemployable. And so the past twenty-five years have seen the growth of a new art; the Art of Self-exploitation, which may be very fine—very delicate—very interesting, but is not Acting.

I am reminded of Hazlitt's dictum in regard to a performance of Kemble's, I forget which, but from what I can learn of Kemble I suspect it would apply equally to any or all of them. Hazlitt wrote: "In this character he did nothing but appear in it."\* The same might be said to-day of most of our leading actors and with equal truth.

Please write as soon as you can spare the time. I have nothing to do but look for work, always a dreary and disappointing exercise, and your letter is sure to stimulate.

Yours,

---

\* From HAZLITT on the ENGLISH STAGE.

"Cato was another of those parts for which Mr. Kemble was peculiarly fitted by his physical advantages. There was nothing for him to do in this character, but to appear in it."—ED.



## LETTER II

London

7th June, 1918.

Like you, you see, I begin to write very small and carefully because of the paper shortage, though I expect I shall finish sprawling all over the page.

Yes, I have made friends through the post, but in only one case has the friendship survived the shock of personal encounter. If I succeed in making another where the *rencontre* may have failed I will say only that it is one I am proud to have on any conditions.

You are not too get-at-able, are you, Redgie? One is never sure how much you have seen, heard and noted; but your intuition—My hat! You have got any woman I have ever met beaten in the first lap. Write, my friend; tell us what you know of things and people, and if you don't tell us something new and tell it differently—Well, I'll eat that hat!

You remind me of Chatterton—I mean the picture poor old Wilson Barrett tried to realise—the starved boy on the truckle-bed\*. But, thank Heaven, you are in no danger of starving and there are many downy cushions on your sofa or I have a totally wrong impression of your Mother and Sister Marie. I look forward to seeing her play. I suppose you think you know her? Well, I shall know her as you do when I have seen her on the stage. I don't think I have ever yet made a mistake about the true personality of anyone I first saw acting and afterwards met in the flesh. The process reversed leads sometimes to sad misjudgment.

That's true what you say of friends—and it is their fault (and misfortune) if we don't want to see or write to them for

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\**Death of Chatterton* by Henry Wallis in the Tate Gallery.—ED.

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long stretches. How dare they cease to be interesting? And how dare we not do all we know to make them *be* interesting instead of just letting them become a habit? How *can* they be interesting if we just take them for granted? And how boring they find us when we do! So perhaps, after all, we share the fault. Twice I've been very near death, and behold! some of the stodgiest people I knew suddenly became interesting. Why? Because my condition had aroused *their* interest; they expanded and I found I had friends where before I had merely acquaintances. We don't give people a chance.

This morning a woman offered me her seat in the Tube. Do I look as feeble as that, Redgie? I'm ever so much better now—fitter than I have been for years since that last operation. But have I got that damned Germany in my veins? The gall that rises in me at thought of her is bitter enough to poison my blood. She's deadly mad because she lacks the two essential qualities of sanity; Reverence and Sense of Humour. But we shall never chain her up. She recognises nothing but Force, never has and never will, and that we should never use—except to drive her back over her frontiers so that she might gather new strength to overrun us again. But England always stretches out helping hands to a fallen foe, heedless of what wicked use that foe may make of her clemency. Dear Fool! I love her.

But can I be of any use to her? I don't see how. The last lot called up, nearly ten years my juniors, are dying like flies, I hear, of pneumonia in the training camps. Even if they'd have me it would be a senseless and wicked thing to sell up Chris' home to go and wash thousands of dishes or peel tons of potatoes in a camp while she starved



## LETTER NUMBER TWO

on my sevenpence a day. Possibly at that job one might get an odd scrap of shrapnel but I know they'd never let me stop a bullet fair and square. I would go, if only to spare a better man, were it not so. But no, it would be something comic—and poor Chris would take it quite seriously.

Do you know Chris and I can spend a whole day together without uttering one single word and yet without misunderstanding and be perfectly happy? Isn't that proof of friendship?

You ask me to tell you more of the London Stage in the Nineties when Pinero bombed it with *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*—and you say I am unjust to Kemble.

As for Kemble, I was always sure his feet were of clay and the London Stage of that day—the Nineties—was in worse case than in his; for in 1814 a genius did arise to save the Theatre, whereas to-day, even, she waits in vain as she has done for forty-four years; and in the Nineties she was at her lowest ebb. Irving was declining; his great triumphs of acting were in the past. His production of *Henry the Eighth* was, I believe, his greatest financial success after *Faust*; but the play is more a pageant than a drama and though his Wolsey was fine the part affords no very great acting opportunity. It was probably one of Kemble's best efforts. Irving's *Lear* was for me a disappointment, as it was for him, though in a different sense. He considered it one of his biggest achievements and was bitterly grieved that it was not recognised as such. It certainly had two great moments; his first appearance and the recognition of Cordelia at the end. Then came *Becket*, a huge triumph for his personality and a very beautiful performance, how beautiful I will one day strive to tell you, but for him calling

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

for no very great effort of impersonation. In those years he was devoting himself to that work that was to be the crown and glory of his life—though all his life had been directed to the same purpose—to raise the social status of the Actor; to remove the old “rogue and vagabond” stigma from his calling; to promote it so that its members might take rank with those of the liberal professions. In 1895 he achieved his end, for his Knighthood was an honour to all who professed the Art and was accepted by him as such. I was on the stage of the Lyceum, within a few feet of him that wonderful day when the profession congratulated him and presented the gold casket and Address which we had all signed. I have never met a personality so dignified—so impressive, whose mere presence so nobly electrified the atmosphere. That such a heartfelt greeting as we gave him should have commemorated an event of such disastrous consequence to the Art he loved is to my mind as deplorable as it is positive.

But I am going too far ahead; I was talking of acting in pre-*Tanqueray* days. Irving's work was practically done and there was no sign of a successor. The Kendals had left the St. James' and were, I think, touring in America with past successes; while Alexander continued most politely in the traditions of that house. He produced *Lady Windermere's Fan* by Oscar Wilde. It was perhaps the most interesting of the new plays, but it was all Author, except for one scene of Actress by Marion Terry, and very beautiful she made it.

John Hare at the Garrick revived *Diplomacy* and indeed Revival was the order of the day—or adaptation from the French, *Diplomacy* (Sardou's *Dora*) was both.

The dramas at Drury Lane, the Adelphi and the Princess's



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had sadly deteriorated from the virility of ten years earlier. *The Whip* was not to be compared with *Youth* or *Human Nature* at the first, I mean in point of interest as stories and in affording acting opportunities. Kyrle Bellew was playing *The Lights of Home* at the Adelphi; but he had not the *brio* of Terriss or Warner and his vehicle had not the simplicity and direct appeal of Henry Pettitt's plays.

*A Royal Divorce*, produced, I think, at the Olympic and moved to the Princess's, has lived for twenty-seven years on its sex interest, the *panache* of Napoleon and the marvellous showmanship of W. W. Kelly. It is the legitimate successor to *East Lynne*, *The Lady of Lyons* and *The Stranger*.

Wyndham was also content with revivals at the Criterion: *Brighton*, *Fourteen Days*, *Betsy* and *Pink Dominoes*. He produced *The Fringe of Society*, adapted from Dumas fils' *Le Demi Monde*. bowdlerised and spoilt.

Hawtrey at the Comedy revived the best of all his farces, *The Arabian Nights* and produced *The Sportsman* (also from the French) in which he, Lottie Venne and Charles Groves were all at their best.

Edward Terry revived Pinero's best farce *The Magistrate*, but the performance was not a patch on the original at the Court with Arthur Cecil, John Clayton and Mrs. John Wood.

There was a clever comedy at the Court by Brandon Thomas called *Marriage* with William Mackintosh at his very excellent best. I saw all of these, but the plays worth remembering were few because acting chances were practically nil and in the revivals performances generally compared unfavourably with the originals.

*Our Boys* was revived at the Vaudeville. David James, one of the best actors I have ever seen, was a joy. William Farren III played his original part, but Sir Geoffrey at best

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is only a feeder, though Farren made one forget that. I have played him, after a fashion—and a long way after Farren—so I know.

Even at the Gaiety *Cinder-ElLEN-Up-Too-Late* was dull by comparison with past productions. Gaiety Burlesque was soon to be no more. Oh, for the days when Nellie Farren, Kate Vaughan, Edward Terry, and Edward Royce, with Dallas and Squire, Connie Gilchrist and William Elton made things hum! And even later when one of the greatest geniuses our stage has ever known, Fred Leslie, held the boards, but those days too—alas!—were past.

Coquelin came to the Opéra Comique with *Thermidor*. We had the exquisite *L'Enfant Prodigue* at the Prince of Wales' and later *Le Statue du Commandeur* with Tarride. Real lessons in acting, these. But I want to tell you about our Stage at that time, and, as you see, I can find nothing of interest to tell; a mere catalogue of revivals, and new plays so undistinguished that memory won't recall them.

Yes, one play I do remember—with acting in it, *The Silent Battle*, in which Olga Nethersole reached her top notch. I had been present when she made her first big hit; the first performance of *The Union Jack* at the Adelphi, a play by no means up to the standard of the great successes there, but it served her well. She climbed higher and indeed became very important as a manager, here and in America, but she never acted so well as in *The Silent Battle*, and though I saw her as Carmen and as Sapho——Well, I prefer not to express my opinion.

Tree produced Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and as Doctor Stockman gave a great performance. Later he revived the play at His Majesty's and clowned the part.

But on the whole the Theatre of the early Nineties was



## LETTER NUMBER TWO

dull as ditch water. No wonder the public were bored with it and preferred the rattle and humanity of the Music Halls. The reason was simply that the profession was growing snobbish ; the old Stock Companies had died out and the members of touring Companies were made to copy slavishly the originals of the parts as created in London so that all opportunity of developing individuality was sacrificed. Where was inspired acting to come from ? Dramatists may lecture and theorise to their hearts' content ; they may write Conversations, state problems (which they usually forget to unravel) and disseminate propaganda, but if they don't make acting opportunity a primary consideration the Art of Acting will die out and without Acting there will be no Theatre.

I must talk about Kemble another time and give you my opinions of him and his precious sister.

Heresy, eh ?

" What about Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse ? " you ask, " was she not indeed the personification of Dignity of Grandeur ? "

To which I answer : " Possibly ; but could she ACT ? "

*Nous discutons.*

### LETTER III

London

12th June, 1918.

Because Shakespeare had no use for Ambition, as he understood the word, we must not assume that he would disapprove the healthful striving, the self-sacrificing endeavour of the true artist. I imagine he thought of Ambition only as an attribute of the tyrant. Your Sister's ambition must be realised; it is wholly justifiable and praiseworthy and it will succeed.

It is years now since any such desire left me—circumstances crushed it out. Sometimes it puts up a feeble flicker but sober reflection extinguishes it. Still I have found compensation.

My Chris is just as full of it as I was at the beginning. I don't know yet what she can do, but should she prove worth while I long to do for her what I failed to do for myself.

Times are difficult and the ideal training for an actor it is no longer possible to obtain—I mean a sound basis of two years in a Shakespearean Repertory with a Star who knows the traditions, starting absolutely at the beginning with Messengers, Second Officers, Fourth Lords, and the Priest in *Hamlet* as an opportunity worth striving for. By the end of that time the music of the verse will have grown into the youngster's being, the words will come on necessity without effort and all the business of the Star parts will have been weighed, considered and stored for future use. The third year should be devoted to modern Farce. I assume that Dancing and Fencing have been practised in those two years; but a round of parts in good farces is invaluable for teaching a light and sure touch, incisiveness,

### LETTER NUMBER THREE

resilience and rapidity. Any tendency towards ponderosity wrongly acquired in the Shakespeare will disappear. I am thinking of the farce acting of thirty years ago when Glover used to produce such farces as *Hawtrey* then excelled in. At the end of those three years the novice should be qualified to start acting in earnest—ready to strike out a Line with the rudiments of a sound technique to build on.

I had no such luck, though, the Lord knows! I got variety enough. I worked in Fit-ups that proved to be mostly Dry-ups; our repertory consisting of *The Bells* and *The Private Secretary* (both plays we had no right to, being copyright, and I'll swear our Manager, who couldn't pay our salaries, never paid an Author's fee), *Aurora Floyd*, *The Unknown*, *The Corsican Brothers*, *The Snowball*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, *The Octoroon*, *The Shaughraun*, *Two Roses* and—invariably—*East Lynne*. There were many others I forget, and innumerable farces, we played a different one each night. It broke the ice for me. I played Utility at first, naturally, and later Walking Gentlemen—sometimes a good Juvenile and then at Christmas Witch in Pantomime and Harlequin. I've managed somehow to play most things, even Pierrot, but never Clown or—I was going to say Policeman, but as I've been on for Constable Bullock as well as every other male part in *East Lynne* I can claim even that, for no Policeman in a Harlequinade was ever more outrageously extravagant than Bullock—in *our* version — and Pitt Hardacre certainly had no fees!

But I was talking about Chris. The Gods alone know whether she will ever act. If it's in her I don't know how to get it out. I have no faith in the modern Repertory Theatres, so-called. They are really Stock Companies not



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Repertories. The plays are all gloom and bad Ibsen—I mean attempts to characterise on his lines but without action to develop the character. And what is a play without action? Just anything you like to call it, but not a Play. And the Schools and Academies of Acting? If they would teach novices to enter and leave a room—what trouble most actors have always with a door!—to say: “Good morning, have you used Pears’ soap?” first merely as an interjection and later to fill the business of entering, closing the door, bowing to hostess, shaking hands with host, accepting invitation to sit, moving a chair from window to fireplace and dropping into it there, gracefully at ease, they would achieve something; but mainly, as I understand and have observed with the Finished, they make the students rehearse a part straight away or put them to reciting pages of Shakespeare *without an audience*, whose place no Teacher or Committee can supply. For remember, an audience is a composite intelligence that makes itself felt as a single entity and it more than half acts the play; without it the Actor cannot *compose* his part. Experience teaches him much but never all; at rehearsals he tries effects—at least some actors do—but he can never crystallise his final intention until the audience plays *its* part.

Now where was I? Of course, Chris. Well, Chris went to no School, except for Dancing and Fencing, and that she hasn’t thanked me for yet because she hasn’t learned the use of them; I refer, of course, to ballet dancing, which she cordially detests.

When she returns to town will you bring your Marie to meet her—say, at the Academy or some such stodgy place? If she should prove eventually to have Art worthy



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of association with your Sister's——Well, it might be amusing for them both.

No, I didn't see *Chatterton*, but I saw Barrett often, and he could never look the starved youth of that picture\*; he was too stocky (typically Yorkshire) but excellent in some parts and great in one. I remember the production of *Chatterton* but I didn't get to it, perhaps I was working at the time.

Now shall we talk of John Philip Kemble and his sister who married Henry Siddons? This gentleman, by the way, throughout his wife's career appears to have remained discreetly in the background.

Kemble and his sister Sarah moved the public by their wonderful voices; impressed by their superb physique and the classic dignity of their carriage; and I admit that these natural graces and the accomplishment implied may well have commanded respect in days when the average mummer commanded little—and even admiration. But could they *act*? Kemble as Coriolanus—remember it was a doctored version he played, not Shakespeare—and as Cato in Addison's play, must have looked the noble Roman to the life; his presence filled the stage; he was London's idol. But when it came to acting, Kean, with his new and natural method, overthrew him in one night.

Kemble was a reciter. Trained at a Jesuit seminary he was half a priest; his Wolsey may have been perfect, but I am glad to have been spared his Hamlet.

Mrs. Siddons probably had more histrionic ability than her famous brother—all the family were actors—but I cannot discover that she ever really characterised. Some of her readings, as, for example, striving for pathos when,

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\**Death of Chatterton* by Henry Wallis in the Tate Gallery—Ed.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

as Lady Macbeth, she said : “ Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done ’t ” would seem to suggest that she thought only of the effect of the moment rather than of the composition of the character.

But she was tragic by temperament, “ beautiful but adamantine.”

What can her Beatrice have been like ? As sprightly as a tank, I should think. Queen Katherine was no doubt magnificent. Magnificent is the word, too, for her Margaret of Anjou in *The Earl of Warwick*. Her great success—on her second *début* at Drury Lane (the first was a failure) was as Isabella in one of Garrick’s re-hashes, *The Fatal Wedding*. She was famous also as Calista in Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent* and as Belvidera (*Venice Preserved*) ; but these parts are all on one note and she declaimed them with the same rhetorical flourish that coloured her speech even in the *sanctity* (I have chosen that word) of the domestic temple. Can’t you hear her at the breakfast-table ? “ I shall be obleeged, Mr. Siddons, if you will favour me with a boiled egg and the middle portion of that gammon rasher.” Picture the alacrity of poor Henry Siddons who at night played Utility to his spouse’s Tragic Lead !

At her zenith she was, no doubt, a magnificent creature, and from what I can gather she played one part to positive perfection ; that part was Sarah Siddons.

But, you may say, there must have been more than mere physical beauty to justify the rhapsodies of so many admiring critics who have chronicled her excellencies, though without exactly telling us how she excelled. Can it be that she possessed something of that quality with which Duse has captured the imagination of our times ? Without troubling to impersonate she yet

### LETTER NUMBER THREE

demonstrates—I can find no better word—a character. She does not *act* it—makes no attempt to *be* it—yet contrives to explain and illustrate it. You can't believe in Duse as Marguerite Gauthier, in fact you know that Marguerite Gauthier could not have been a bit like that ; yet you know that were Duse in Marguerite Gauthier's circumstances it is exactly so that she would think and speak. This is the art of the reciter ; at its highest a great art, but emphatically not the Art of Acting.

Did you ever hear of Samuel Brandram ? He was a great reciter, second only, I was told, to J. C. M. Bellew, Kyrle Bellew's father, whom I never saw. Brandram could recite anything and make you see it ; he would mimic and suggest Falstaff or Sir Andrew, Micawber or Uriah Heep, Smike or Fagin with equal cleverness. It is quite likely that he could have *personated* neither. If a beautiful woman had such a gift, with the added effects of costume and the glamour of the theatre to help her and chose always parts to which her physique was suited, she might well be acclaimed as great, when, in fact, she could not act at all.

This is merely a theory, and though it may explain Mrs. Siddons, it won't do for John Philip, for I'm sure he had nothing of Brandram's ability.

Now do write and abuse

Yours heretically,



## LETTER IV

London

18th June, 1918.

Ever since I had your letter I have been impatient to answer it, but I've been kept whirling about—to little purpose, I fear—by affairs of more importunity than importance.

What do I do? Run round in a circle wasting time and energy seeking opportunity instead of making it, though I know quite well its elements are floating in the air around me inviting me to grasp and mould them.

I am at present trying to persuade a would-be dramatist to convert a three-act farce, in which there is a really brilliant notion, into a four-act play of serious interest. You would not think this possible or worth while. It is, anyhow, an impossible farce. I have offered an idea which my author inclines to accept. It was one that came to me when I was in hospital just before we met—not three months ago, though it seems——Well, sometimes yesterday and sometimes years. It came to me in a sort of half conscious dream under the influence of the morphia and it blends most happily with the root notion of what ought *not* to be farce. I roughed out a scenario some time back, the author is working on it and in about a month I am to see him at his place in Bexhill and consider the result of his efforts.

One play I tinkered in this fashion ran for over seven months in two West End theatres. So you see, if it comes off, it is worth while. It is also true that two other plays, similarly treated, have run less than two months between them. And how many have never been produced!

No, I don't want "stodginess," but it seemed proper to



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suggest it for the meeting of two girls. I mean that in London most public meeting places are either cheap and vulgar, or expensive—and vulgar. After all, the Palm Court at Regent Palace is more amusing than the Ritz—to which Chris and I do not aspire. I'm with you about "Heaven above and the road beneath" in the right company, but even the right company could not convert Kensington Gardens—much less Piccadilly—to suitable "road beneath" for our purpose. The meeting I project must be within walls.

How wise and understanding you are about this army business, and how good of you to know I am not a coward. I wish I did. As you say: there is never an alternative when the "right thing" stares one in the face. But you are mistaken in saying we have fifty selves. You are particularly many-sided, but in each of us there is a true Self, reconcilable to all the varying moods, a chord, so to speak, that harmonises all the tones. One has to find that. Self-analysis is always difficult; the "still small voice" will not be stifled and when one listens with one's whole being and obeys—then is Peace, Peace that can never be achieved by shirking or evasion or deception—that comes only from inside.

Am I prosing again? Please forgive.

In that play *Cheating Cheaters* I thought Kyrle Bellew's was easily the best performance. The personality does not appeal to either of us but we must recognise the cleverness. You would hate her in *The Knife* but it wouldn't be just for the performance is brilliant though the play revolted me beyond expression; it is unwholesome, a catch-penny show in the worst possible taste.

I'm afraid prejudice in regard to personalities (*pro* as

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well as *con*) ruins much criticism : that and fear of the libel laws—and consideration for the advertising columns.

Yes, I could tell you a great deal more of Wilson Barrett.

I remember him at his zenith : in the days of *The Silver King* and *Claudian*. They will tell you that E. H. Brooke was better as Wilfred Denver, but don't believe it. Barrett was unapproachable, certainly in the first Act. Then came *Claudian*, which was a huge personal triumph ; London flocked ; women mobbed him and the house " rose " at him nightly. There was the story of how he clutched the tableaux curtains as they fell and turning to the Company shouted hysterically : " Where's Irving now ? " It may not be true in fact but it is in spirit for his vanity was his downfall. But how splendid was his revival, and how large and generous-hearted he proved himself. It was in his dressing-room I met Marie Corelli. Of her, perhaps, more anon.

What was Barrett's great part ? Why, Pete in *The Manxman*, superlatively. I saw Matheson Lang play it not long ago and I admit that I have rarely seen a more perfect exhibition of technique. Very shortly afterwards I saw Derwent Hall Caine attempt it. He had little in his favour ; but in one or two scenes the part carried him away and he made effects by sheer sincerity that Lang never achieved. But Barrett ! I think it was the most profoundly touching performance—certainly in domestic drama—that I have ever seen. It reminded me of what I had heard of Charles Dillon in *Belphegor*. One sat with a lump in one's throat, almost choked and yet smiling ; proud to feel that humanity could be so unaffectedly noble, thankful that the truth of the picture was appealing to every soul in the audience, as the tensivity of the atmosphere

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proved. It was, to my mind, in every sense a great performance. I have seen very few worthy to compare with it.

Is Marie happier about her part? I hope so. If one's work is not also a pleasure its quality inevitably suffers. What joy acting can be—in the right conditions. But the part must be good and the play must be good, and one's fellow actors must be good, sympathetic and technically able. Yes, and then one may act like an archangel and if the play fails the effort is wasted so far as recognition is concerned. But I trust your Sister may enjoy all those happy conditions and success to crown them.

Yours unreservedly,



## LETTER V

London

27th June, 1918.

I have had to lunch with me to-day a man, friend of the author, who professes to be most anxious to back the play I am now working on ; that serious modern play, you know, that was a farce and shouldn't have been. I hesitate to use the word "drama," for it usually conveys a wrong impression, though Tragedy, Comedy, Farce or Burlesque are all really Drama. The word means "the thing in action." But if one says "drama," someone is sure to echo with a sneer "Ho, melodrama!" not knowing what that means either, for it is used with a different shade of sense by everyone who abuses it. Its correct use is a large and interesting subject which we will one day try to thresh out.

But now, before I answer your last, I must tell you something about myself. A friend in the Air Ministry has suggested a way in which I might make myself useful in quite possible conditions. He thinks he can get me an offer of work in the Sea-planes Contracts Department. It would mean giving up all present business and any thought of acting for the hours are very long and it would take six months to make me worth my job. I loathe the idea of driving a quill for a living. I did that—Oh, how many years ago?—in a Solicitor's office in St. Swithin's Lane, for five shillings a week ; and read Dumas when I wasn't addressing envelopes or copying briefs in my fresh-from-school copper-plate. I think dear old Dumas taught me more than the lawyer did. I have not yet quite made up my mind. It is not that I want to leave acting but it seems that acting has very definitely left me. No one wants my work and



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the waiting is weary, discouraging and expensive. The kind I am doing now—I mean the play-tinkering—is interesting and not unremunerative—when I can get enough of it. But it was invented only as an adjunct to the acting; at present it has nothing to junct to.

Now for your letter. You ask me for further opinions of the Stage of to-day as compared with the wonderful Eighties. The Paper Controller might object, and with good reason, long before I had said my say if I expressed even half I feel, but I doubt my pen's faculty even for so much.

You are right to pillory Miss ——— if that is the lady's name. It is an iniquity that such incompetence should be allowed professionally to flaunt its ineptitude in any first-class theatre. But is it not typical of the whole situation? And yet, as I have told you, things are, I believe, more promising than they have been at any time since the beginning of the Nineties, for I seem to sense a return to Drama—a desire on the part of the public to be amused and entertained by real acting that shall give them an emotional uplift after their dreary drenching in the greyness of Manchester mist. Oh, those depressing Lancashire plays! How they bear down upon the spirit and send one, “in dumps, so dull and heavy,” dolefully to bed!—even the farces, clever as they may be. I remember one quite funny in an undertaking sort of way—they are usually about coffins, gin-drinking, penury, cheating and every sordid kind of sexual relationship. That is the Lancashire form of humour.

But managers are beginning to feel that the public want Light, Hope, Virility, Action, yet after so many years of problem and theory and of type acting, they hardly know where to turn for actors who could put Drama across. No commercial manager dare risk a Shakespearean production

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without a Star. He knows it wouldn't pay even with one unless done with fitting equipment. You can't reconstitute a period for the masses with two pillars and a horizon cloth and the terrible impositions of labour make adequate production economically impossible. The Old Vic. may persevere and do splendid training work in the Waterloo Road but move the Company and productions as they stand into Shaftesbury Avenue and they would play to empty benches. The audiences in West End theatres have a right to the best in every detail; mere competent performance and make-believe setting are not worth the price of admission.

But Drama will come. Demand creates supply in acting as in everything else and there are hopeful signs for those who can read.

For *Chu-Chin-Chow*, *A Little Bit of Fluff*, *Romance*, and other war-time products, which satisfy the public's taste at the moment, I have little respect; but there are ominous grumblings. There is a slump now but if the revival does not give the public what it wants the "distant rumours" will develop into thunder.

It seems necessary to get events in very long perspective in order to perceive which of them were landmarks. I don't believe anyone saw how vital to the whole business of the Theatre, in the artistic as well as the commercial sense, was the production of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*; and it was years before I realised that the high-water mark of excellence in my time was reached in the Eighties. The Theatre then had not lost its mystery, which must always form a great part of its appeal, and in those days that was maintained by the dignity of many productions and performances. In addition to Irving we had the Kendals

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at their best. We had the fine virility of Barrett and his Company which included his brother George, E. S. Willard, John Maelean, Walter Speakman, Charles Hudson, Charles Fulton, and that fine old actor, Clifford Cooper. The dramas at Drury Lane and the Adelphi with Henry Neville, William Terriss (when he wasn't at the Lyceum), Charles Warner, James Fernandez, J. D. Beveridge, Charles Cartwright, W. L. Abingdon, Charles Glenney, all men, who though they excelled in certain parts, could play anything they might be cast for, and play it well; indeed as I consider their names I know I am safe in saying that they would play any part remarkably.

But it was not only on the stage; the attitude of the public was more dignified towards the Theatre. It expected more. It exacted more. It was severely critical and even, on occasion, harsh; but its praise, its appreciation were well worth striving for.

The Press, too, treated the Drama with a more responsible consideration. I don't say they said more about it. They didn't. Indeed not half as much, but what they said was more carefully weighed and to the purpose. The exploitation of personalities was not allowed. No excuse was made for inexperience. In fact the young man or woman who was patently incapable of playing anything other than the part for which they might be cast by virtue of certain obvious qualities, was found defective in technical training and told very bluntly to go to the provinces and learn his job. I say nothing of the cheap device of paragraphing intimate domestic details which have no concern either for the public or the Theatre. It was unknown. It would not have been tolerated for one moment by a discriminating *Pit*, who were the mouthpiece of public opinion and



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went to the Theatre to enjoy Acting and for no other reason.

Critics wrote with knowledge of their subject ; they did not confine themselves to generalities ; they appreciated nice points of technique, weighed the value of business, discussed readings, analysed and gave chapter and verse in support of their decisions, which, in consequence, won respect from both public and profession. Clement Scott, who wrote for *The Daily Telegraph*, could make or mar an actor or a production, for at that time his critiques were reasoned arguments. Later he lost his head. He failed to understand Ibsen and his power waned partly by reason of his vulgar abuse of that master-playwright.

There were others whose integrity was unassailable, notably Joseph Knight, who swayed public opinion because they were capable, scholarly and, above all, logical.

To tell you of the performances that they justly praised would fill a volume. Someday we may talk of some of them—that is to say I shall talk and you will listen !

And to-day——?

Well, I am sure the Stage has many well-wishers among the critics ; but how many of them have a standard to criticise by ? How can they have ? What have they seen ? No acting that can by any means be called great. I speak of the men of under forty. Some of the old brigade are happily still with us, but I don't think many of them write notices now. G. E. Morrison of *The Morning Post* must remember, Chance Newton of *The Referee* and Malcolm Watson of *The Daily Telegraph* ; there may be others ; but I think sometimes that even these forget.

Don't misunderstand me : there have been many fine performances of recent years, but mostly in ephemeral



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plays. The greatest acting must have for its setting a great play. It must be a *Macbeth*, a *Hamlet*, an *Othello* or an *Ædipus*; but great acting can be achieved irrespective of the literary quality of its vehicle if the emotions and passions are skilfully dealt with and the character properly proportioned—in a word, if the psychological development be just.

I would walk barefoot to the Strand and wait all day in the jam at the Pit door and fight my way in, as many a time I have done—it adds a zest to the enjoyment entirely lacking in the “patient ass” attitude of the queue—if I might see again some performances I have seen and some that, like an idiot, I missed. I would do it gladly. Yes, at my age. But to-day in our world—as I suppose in most others—it is the blatant, loud-voiced, self-advertising, Barnum type, the square-jawed, with so little sense of proportion—or humour—that often having only the smallest modicum of capability they yet think themselves mighty geniuses, who force their way to the top and, marvellous to relate, are accepted at their own valuation. Or the suave, politic charlatans, who have flourished in all ages, like——Well, like Garrick, let us say.

I wouldn't for the world have you learn to beat a drum, my Redgie, but I'm thinking of taking lessons myself for the benefit of my few friends.

Yours benignly,

## LETTER VI

London

8th July, 1918.

Unbalanced, am I? Are you throwing me a bouquet, Redgie? All artists are unbalanced; at least I wouldn't give a hang for the one who wasn't so occasionally. Still artists being unbalanced does not prove that the unbalanced are artists. Quite right, my Redgie, and I sit corrected.

And I suppose, too, one cannot *strive* to be an artist; one is or one isn't, and many think they are who never will be; and maybe some, who don't know it, are—which may sound involved, but isn't.

I may have been unbalanced in the days of my ambition. I'm as sane now as the Duke of York's column, which always strikes me as the perfect analogue of overcooked suet pudding. Occasionally I feel I want to do things but the desire soon flickers down. You've got to—simply must! You want opportunity which your temperament disdains to seek for itself. Well, I told you I was going to take lessons on the drum. All you need is indication as to which door you should knock at. The pen is not only "mightier than the sword" it is a master-key that unlocks for him who has the gift to apply it. I shall seek the door.

Chris comes to town next week to play her drama—very well then, Melodrama, if you like—in a Suburban Music Hall. I dread to see it but of course I shall. I saw the play years ago at the old Marylebone Theatre, almost forgotten now. I know the child must be terribly overweighted by her part.

So you think the critics are more humane to-day; "kinder" you call them and the Public more tolerant.

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Granted. But what is the result? Art does not thrive on kindness and toleration. The standard becomes lower and to-day the standard is deplorable. Those who don't insist on having the best never get it. The Theatre was always an amusement—a pastime, now it is *only* that. It has been and may still become something better as well; an intellectual refreshment, educational without seeming to be so. The Gregory's powder of moral precept administered in the strawberry jam of entertainment, but, like the child, if the public detects the Gregory's powder it will never again look at the strawberry jam. That is what the dismal dramas of the last twenty years have been doing for a large percentage of potential playgoers.

And you object to my calling Garrick a charlatan. “*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*” you quote and say I can prove nothing.

As for your quotation: isn't when they're dead the kindest as well as the safest time to criticise them? It may not be very helpful to them but it's enlightening for us and certainly it's safer—unless they happen to have great-grandsons with shot-guns.

Yes, I know Hogarth's picture, and, to me, the fact that the artist immortalised the waking moment of Richard after his soul-torturing dream in the person of Garrick proves nothing but that the painter wished to advertise his friend.

Now listen patiently for a few minutes: Garrick was undoubtedly a man of culture and accomplishment, a master of the social art and full of parlour tricks. His anecdotes, his imitations, his studies of various types of bumpkinhood were cameos of characterisation. As a mimic



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he was supreme. His india-rubber face baffled Reynolds and every other artist who attempted to portray him. But when we apply to him the acid test of Shakespearean impersonation how does he stand as Actor ?

Finding himself hampered by the classic tradition he decided to rid himself of its conventions ; not content with Shakespeare's plays as written he edited, altered and re-wrote them to suit the idiosyncrasies of his own personality.

Consider his treatment of *The Taming of the Shrew* : he cut the Induction and Act I and condensed the remaining four Acts into three. Of these he hacked the text unmercifully, changing words and phrases to suit his fancy and interpolating verses of his own in their midst. Katharine's celebrated speech he cut into three portions ; discarding the first and last, he hashed the middle cut, giving it a new sense by rearrangement and brought down the curtain on a couplet of which, nevertheless, he changed the text, taken from the body of the aforesaid speech.

In the last Act of *Romeo and Juliet* he devised and interpolated one of those scenes of passion in which he imagined himself to excel, waking up Juliet in the tomb for the purpose of exhibiting his *tour de force*.\* If you are disposed to forgive this you will hesitate when you consider the banal phrases he had the impudence to mix with Shakespeare's verse : Juliet, awakening, exclaims :

“*Bless Me ! How Cold it is.*”

Later :—

Juliet : “Death's in thy face.”

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\* In Garrick's preface to his acting version of *Romeo and Juliet*, published by Tonson, 1758, he states that his principal design was to “clear the original as much as possible from the *jingle* and *quibble* which were always the objection to the reviving it.” My italics, ED.

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Romeo :

“ It is indeed ;

“ I struggle with him now. My powers are blasted

“ ’Twixt death and life I’m torn, I am distracted !

“ But death is strongest.”

How’s that ?

In preparing his version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* he omitted, naturally, those vulgar persons the Clowns. As he also cut the love scenes of Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena it is difficult to understand what he retained. However he dropped in twenty-eight musical numbers, to many of which he graciously contributed the words.

He cut the first three Acts of *A Winter’s Tale* and elaborated the remainder taking full credit for the authorship.

He “expurgated” *Hamlet* and this is how he excused himself :  
“ I had sworn I would not leave the Stage till I had rescued that noble play from all the rubbish of the fifth Act. I have brought it out without the Grave-diggers’ trick and the fencing match.”

Modest little fellow, wasn’t he ?

This self-styled “worshipper of Shakespeare” used Colley Cibber’s arrangement of *Richard the Third*, in itself an excellent drama. It was compiled by its author from various sources, for Cibber borrowed freely from *Richard the Second*, and *Henry the Fourth*, *Fifth* and *Sixth*.

It is only just to tell you that all the leading actors who followed Garrick to Irving used this arrangement.

Perhaps Garrick created his greatest tragic impression in *King Lear*. But how ? Not by delineation of Shakespeare’s majestic creation but in a version prepared for him by the hymn-writer, Nahum Tate, wherein Cordelia survived to marry Edgar, while Lear, having vanquished the villains

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sent to murder him and killing two in a vigorous stage fight, joined the lovers' hands.

The vulgarity of this *popular* edition suggests that, as in the other works which Garriek himself edited, psychological development was sacrificed to pure theatricality.

You can judge from all this the exact measure of Garrick's admiration for Shakespeare. My suspicion is that there was a poet and actor for whom he had still greater admiration and I leave you to guess his name.

Shakespeare was not good enough for Garrick, so he mutilated him.

Was this proof of genius?

No doubt—if we allow that Garrick was greater than Shakespeare.

I should not be so particular in all this detail were it not that we have the pre-eminence of Garrick for ever rammed down our throats. Still you may feel that I have not yet made out my case—that proving him guilty of vandalism does not disprove his greatness as an actor. I said he was a charlatan, one who “chatters in order to deceive,” and all I have established is that he had no reverence for Shakespeare. Also you think you detect bias against him in one phrase I have used: “a scene of passion in which he *imagined himself to excel*.” Perhaps he did excel in such scenes, I am willing to give him that and that alone is sufficient to have established his popularity; though he couldn't have been better than Warner as Coupeau or Pateman in the final frenzy of Quilp and no one proposes to canonize them.

I did not say Garrick could not act, but I did and do say he was not worthy, as an actor, to hold the highest place in our national estimation.



## LETTER NUMBER SIX

The greatest artist is he who attains greatness in his portrayal of the greatest conceptions.

Irving did not owe his greatness to the *crise des nerfs* in *The Bells* nor Kean to the epilepsy of Sir Giles Overreach.

Read the scene of Richard's awakening on Bosworth morning as arranged by Cibber and the interpolated domestic scene with Lady Anne. You will find them actor-proof, that is to say: given certain technical skill even a bad actor will get away with them.

Why, Edmund Tearle did it.

No doubt Garrick was able to create an atmosphere of similar poignancy for his dying Romeo. I should like to have seen him receive the news of Juliet's death—to have heard him say: "Then I defy you stars!" By those moments I judge Romeo. We are told of Garrick's effects in his scenes with the Ghost in *Hamlet*. The appreciation that Fielding put into Partridge's mouth is accepted generally as good evidence. If Partridge were a character of Shaw's it might be evidence of his creator's own opinion; but I credit Fielding as a better artist and refuse to acknowledge Partridge as a competent critic of the Drama. Still allowing Garrick those particular effects they are not the actor's final test as Hamlet.

How he "brought off" the last Act without the Grave-diggers and the fencing match I cannot say.

In *Macbeth* no doubt he was impressive in the Murder Scene. Who isn't? But here again the scene of passion is not the supreme issue. I prefer to reserve judgment till I have witnessed the disintegration.

I have no information on his performance of Othello and Shylock, if indeed he played these parts. Yet it is to

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be supposed that, if he did in fact *excel* in scenes of passion, he cannot have shirked or let slip the transcendant opportunity Othello affords. The growth from marble impassivity to white-hot fury culminating in epileptic seizure is probably the greatest psychological achievement of Shakespeare and is the supreme test of the tragic actor's powers. *If Garrick passed this test his fame might well have rested on that alone.* Even Lear, though requiring perhaps more staying power—for who shall give its full effect to the tremendous curse, pass through the storm and the great scene of the three contrasted types of dementia on the top of his form and then crown all by exposition of the foundered grandeur of the climax without succumbing to the physical strain?—does not call for such complete mastery of every phase of tragic expression as does the agony of the Moor.

These heights are not approached in Shylock which, it may be supposed, was regarded by Garrick as a comic character and therefore beneath his dignity. “The red-haired Jew” had been so treated by all its chief exponents since Burbage until Macklin corrected the error. It might be supposed that England's Greatest Actor would himself have instituted this reform.

But no ; it was as Abel Drugger in Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*—altered by Garrick (naturally !) to suit himself and re-named *The Apothecary*—that he achieved his great triumph ; but his greatest was to apply his business method, learned in the wine trade, to the management of Drury Lane Theatre and conceal his commercial *flair* by a charming social manner, while he judiciously advertised himself by reciting at my lady Furbelow's rout and by replying for the ladies at my lord Bullion's supper party. And it is upon all this that his

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immortality is founded rather than upon performances of our Great Playwright's masterpieces.

The fact is Garrick was the Fashion and to-day this personal popularity would have earned for him a knighthood.

The play called *David Garrick* with the cast-iron part that we all have a shot at some time or other—and all think we are wonderful because audiences invariably cheer us, however technically, physically or temperamentally unsuited we may be — has nothing whatever to do with the real Garrick. Robertson adapted it from a French Play called *Sullivan* (which sounds Irish) and the French author took it from the German. The lady who became Mrs. Garrick was never the daughter of a City Alderman but was a Viennese dancer named Eva Viegel who changed it to *Violette* by command of her patron the Empress Maria-Theresa. She survived Garrick, lived to applaud Kean and died in 1823, aged ninety-eight.

There have been dozens of adaptations of *Sullivan*, one or two of them even better acting vehicles than Robertson's. It has often been said, even in print, that the play was an adaptation of a drama by Alexandre Dumas. This is wrong. Dumas wrote *Kean ou Génie et Désordre*, which also has often been adapted and to this day is a favourite, especially in Germany, but it has no more to do with Edmund Kean than *Sullivan* has to do with David Garrick.

Don't forget we must fix up that meeting when Chris returns to town and before you leave.

I look forward to it.

Yours hopefully,

P.S.—Yes, Garrick did play Othello but Betterton's "far exceeded" his performance.



## LETTER VII

In the train for Bexhill,  
20th July, 1918.

I was up at 6 for this journey—had to wait in a huge mob at the booking office and got a ticket at 10.40—into the train at 12.10 after waiting all that hour and a half in a dense crowd, and the train is not due out until 1.55. How is that for patience! I am looking forward to lunch—have not eaten for twenty-four hours—when I got to the club at 9.30 last night it was too late for food—there, or at any restaurant. I was on my feet all yesterday and after standing in that blessed ticket queue for nearly three hours I am just about played out. But I believe one can get a whiskey and soda at 12.30. Anyway I am in a luncheon car, thank the gods!

Help!

No whiskey till the train starts, but I am promised a ham sandwich. O woeful and inadequate substitute!

I had to rush down here to minister to that play of which I told you. You shall hear more of it anon.

Sir Anderson Critchett is the man your Mother positively must see. He is easily the first oculist we have and, incidentally, one of the very best friends of our profession. Ignore the two opinions you have already had for her; his word will settle the question.

R. C. Carton, you know, is Critchett's brother. He used to act—married Miss Compton and now writes plays to suit her personality. She can play her very mannered self rather attractively. Carton turns his phrases well, and by getting good support for her in the other parts the things pass off rather delightfully. I remember how thoroughly I enjoyed *The Great Pink Pearl* (in which Cecil

## LETTER NUMBER SEVEN

Raleigh collaborated). *Lord and Lady Algy* gave Hawtrey one of his best chances. In *Lady Huntworth's Experiment* and *Wheels Within Wheels* I saw Miss Vane, a real actress, in the parts designed for Miss Compton and thoroughly enjoyed both comedies.

Well, at last I have seen your Marie act and I am entirely delighted. No, not entirely, for I did not approve her playing such a part. Make no mistake, I am not squeamish. I think of it only from a business standpoint. The play is clever—reminds me of one I saw at the *Grand Guignol*—but the author should be eternally grateful to Mademoiselle Marie. She exposed for us the dignity and forcefulness of a wretched personality with a superb technique. But I wish she would never play the part again. I am so afraid someone who matters commercially may see her. You know—don't you?—that the fools who run our theatres (like most of the critics) always confuse player with part. Should a manager chance to see her I imagine him offering her some beastly cat to play—probably without the opportunities this part gives—that would do her more harm than good. Her *métier* is, obviously, tragic lead. I saw in her a Queen Katharine, Emilia, yes, and Lady Macbeth; and there were flashes of lightness that promised Beatrice and Olivia, Katharine the Shrew, inevitably, and—can I say Viola? Portia, certainly, were it not that Portia's "sunny locks hang on her temples like a golden fleece." And a fair wig would spoil her. She could play Belvidera if anyone had the pluck to attempt a revival of Otway's *Venice Preserved*, but above all Mariana in *The Wife*. How I long to produce that play!

I have decided to give the Sea-planes a miss and, in case conscience should prick, to take my chance before the

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

National Service Board. I can't think I shall be of the slightest use to them. My card will be endorsed "Old Horse, long in the tooth, send to the knacker's." But seriously, though I am heaps better in health, I fear I should be rather a liability than an asset in any sort of military capacity.

I want to see Marie act something worthy of her. I know she has had disappointments but early success kills endeavour. What is of value that has no cost? And who enjoys the sweets as he who has tasted the bitters! (Please pardon platitude.) No, I am no longer cynical. Cynicism is narrow and weak. In my cynical years I said: I live only to pay my debts. That I *will* do, but not now in that spirit. I have been made to suffer—justly; four months ago, when I thought I was at the end, I saw that—also I lost Fear. Are you laughing at my earnestness? Yes, I can see you. Well, I *am* in earnest, but I have not lost my sense of humour I hope. I know my *gaucheries* and many failings.

"Do you know them all?" you ask.

Incorrigible Redgie! No, of course I don't. Who does know all his failings? for his worst is probably the one he takes most pride in as a virtue.

Chris arrived on Sunday, like a gipsy, brown and shabby, and on Monday I went to see her act. Oh Redgie, it was a great shock—really rather bitter. The play and Company were too awful and Chris was certainly not the best of them—if not quite the worst. Poor child, when I went to her dressing-room she nearly broke down. I wanted to myself. It's not her fault, she is entirely over-weighted and—Look here, Redgie, I'd forgive Chris anything—as long as she was sincere, not deceiving herself or spoiling the funda-



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mental Truth that I believe is in her—anything, but bad acting. That I can't stand; stilted, artificial, sing-song, without heart or meaning—perfunctory walking through—ignorant, sluttish giggling, insulting author (whether Melville or Shakespeare) by inattention and carelessness, all this is nauseous to me.

I'm not accusing Chris of this, her weakness is due mainly to inexperience, but it's the kind of vice that is bred in the school she's in—Yes, and practised in higher places.

I have met some of the people in Chris' Company and I do wish they were better type. Our profession is extraordinarily educative. All sorts come into it and some of the best actors have risen literally from the gutter and no one would ever have suspected it. But there is a kind, and there are many of it, that has no recommendation whatever, except that it is cheap. They are to be found in all these small Drama Companies in most of the third—and fourth—rate theatres. There can be no possible future for them and their presence on the Stage is an impenetrable mystery. They get the calling a bad name among the many who still regard us as rogues and vagabonds. I'm not complaining of their morals, they are not my affair. With me manners were ever more important than morals. It is when immorality flaunts its bad manners that I won't tolerate it.

I am reminded of a story two very decent people told me; on enquiring a Landlady's terms: "If you're really married," she said, "the rooms are twelve shillings, but if it's one o' them there theat'ical arrangements I want fifteen 'cos they burn so much gas."

Chris has friends in this Company that I don't approve. All I ask is that she should not be ashamed of them—that

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

she shall talk to me frankly of them. As long as she says : They are my friends I am ready to give them what respect I can.

You remember what I said about keeping the interest of our friends : when we care, really care, our interest is ever-green, it must be. It may lapse for moments and vary with health, mental and physical, but as long as the real caring exists the interest can never die. It's not the interest we have to worry about but the caring, when that becomes an effort even God can't help. The point being that if the caring is real, founded on faith and respect, it *must* last for its qualities are eternal. But so often we are mistaken and sometimes we don't even take trouble to deceive ourselves. That's piteous. I have no belief in the ties of blood engendering affection, I know it did not with me towards my parents, and I like to be very sure—as I am—that it has nothing to do with the friendship between Chris and me.

You haven't misunderstood what I said of my parents, have you, Redgie ? My Father was the best friend a boy ever had. It is a lasting grief to me that as a man I was never allowed the joy of his comradeship. My Mother, who survived him for thirty years, had only one fault, she idolised me.

*Back in London, Tuesday.*

I didn't post this—couldn't make time to finish it down there. Now I return to find Chris with a temperature. I'm afraid she had 'flu. I ordered eucalyptus, quinine and cinnamon. The child is ill, should not be playing at all but there is no understudy and she must.

I suppose we all go through that experience. I have been carried to the wings, lifted on to a rostrum, and given a push

## LETTER NUMBER SEVEN

to send me on ; then played a heavy scene and collapsed on the exit. But I know no better tonic than being obliged to act when you're ill and many actors have admitted to me that that has been their experience. I have known cases when it has practically effected a cure ; undoubtedly because to act, even moderately well, one must forget self entirely and the ill not dwelt upon heals by the process of nature.

But I'm afraid it's not a good cure for 'flu and Chris is too young and delicate for the strain.

We have had a strenuous week-end and done a tremendous amount of work on the play and it's settled to produce it—to “try it out” anyway for two or three weeks. No Star would play the part now because of the other man, but the result of the changes is quite remarkable for the process of cutting him down has built him up, but you can't get some actors to realise that the centre of the stage and all the speeches will never make a part if its proportions are wrong. As for the woman ; the part has been so altered to fit a friend of the backer, who can never play it, that it has become worthy of a real actress.

I feel sure it will be good, striking even ; but I fear it won't have a box-office appeal. And in the end, you know, the Public is always right. That doesn't mean that every play it approves is good or that what it condemns is invariably bad, but there is something of good always in what it likes and be sure there is a psychological kink in everything it damns.

Yours as usual,



## LETTER VIII

London

1st August, 1918.

It is a fact, well known, that "Mary was a housemaid," but Marie was always a Princess. We were a quaint party, weren't we, Redgie? an odd assortment of humans. Though three of us belonged to the same profession what miles of difference between the types! But we had your wisdom and *savoir faire* as common denominator, and, thus reconciled, we formed an ideal *parti carré*—to my thinking, anyway. And I take credit to myself for the selection of the *milieu*. The Connaught was an inspiration, not quite smart enough to form an ideal setting for the Princess' *panache*, but not actually stodgy. I don't fit in the Piccadilly and Chris would be shy there. Your unconscious *aplomb* is proof against environment and the Princess would sail sublimely unconscious of surroundings through Petticoat Lane or the Gardens of the Vatican.

Of course Chris adores her; though a little in awe of you. I dug out my Byron, told her to dip into it and imagine you the author. "Familiarity," I said, "may breed a better appreciation." "It's the way of looking right through you," she said, "with a sort of encouraging smile which yet somehow lets you know it's not really rude to pry right into your thoughts;" which proves that Chris has not yet developed full consciousness of her inheritance as a feminine. For we know, don't we, Redgie? that any intelligent woman can read the ordinary decent man—know him through and through—in a month if she cares to and gauge to a nicety what he will do, how he will feel and act in any given circumstances. Perhaps that is why they so often seem to find the scamps more attractive.

## LETTER NUMBER EIGHT

I'm so glad you agree with me about Iris Hoey. I felt sure I was safe in recommending *Billeted* for after lunch. I had seen it before and found it delightful, but then I always love Iris Hoey if she has enough—and good enough—to do. I wish we could see her do something more really worthy of her. Years ago I remember her as Ariel, when Tree sent *The Tempest* on tour, but she was immature then. I wish she had stuck to Shakespeare. I believe she might have done great things. Iris Hoey in Comedy and Miriam Lewes in Tragedy ought to be doing the best Legitimate work to-day; they could if they had had the chance. I know no others in any sort of position with their potentialities for such work.

I didn't like that production of *The Tempest*, but how to do it properly?—if it must be put upon the stage. I'm afraid I don't see the necessity.

And that reminds me, Redgie, don't write the title of a play as a quotation. It is wrong. I know even critics do it—or the composers—but it's not grammar. Names of plays, books, songs, newspapers should be printed in italics or written underlined. And if you wished to repeat, for example, what *The Times* said of THE TIMES (Pinero's play) then put the newspaper in italics and the play's name in block capitals. Charles Mathews wrote a Comedy (from Dumas' *Le Mari de la Veuve*) which he called *Why did you Die*? If ever a title deserved inverted commas surely that was it, for the phrase was repeated all through the piece; but it would be wrong as to quote *What are the Wild Waves Saying*? Claribel's song (I think it was Claribel's) which my Father most loved to hear my Mother sing, when I was so high. They were the most untheatrical people imaginable, but I remember going with them to At Homes at Elizabeth



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Philp's, a well-known composer of ballads in her time, whose drawing room was an artistic *rendez-vous*, in fact the typical *Salon* of those days. Charles Dickens had a house in the same street, Miss Philp lived opposite to us and Antoinette Stirling down the road. I was presented to her and Mackinlay the day he married her. At Miss Philp's Tree and George Grossmith (before Gilbert and Sullivan Opera days) used to visit and Harry Proctor and Signor Foli and many others as famous and more so in the literary and artistic world. It was my first glimpse of it.

The Regent's Park Canal explosion in November, I think, of 1874—caused by a gentleman in charge of a barge full of gunpowder being careless with a match after lighting his pipe under a bridge: parts of the barge were afterwards disentangled from parts of the bridge (I saw them!) but no part of the gentleman—shook us all in our beds. I started awake thinking it a thunder clap. Every pane of glass in the front of every third house on our side of the street was shattered; the same occurred to the back windows of the houses opposite.

The first serious play I remember was *Othello* at the Park Theatre, Camden Town—no longer existent. And my first Pantomime——But that's a long story.

We start rehearsing next week. I gave you the cast at lunch, and I'm glad you think it a promising venture. Act I I have no doubt about; it is full of grip and intensity. It's too dead easy to write a first Act or there wouldn't be so many bad plays; the advantages of opening a new subject with new characters are enormous; the trouble is not to write as good but much better Acts to follow it, for in them one no longer has those advantages. Our change



## LETTER NUMBER EIGHT

of *venue* in Act II has its good points and bad. The Public hates to be switched off if it's interested; on the other hand the new characters are some compensation and they will be very well played. Act III is good, I think; and the climax cast-iron. Act IV is the crux. Suspense is well sustained and the development is logically inevitable; yet whether the Public will be interested in a good woman and two really splendid men without reference to the eternal sex problem I can't say, but I believe so. Of course I have no end of worrying business to attend to; the backers are un-(theatrical) professional and regard me with much suspicion. I wish we could have the advantage of your sincerity and quick perception at some of the final rehearsals, but your house will be ready by then and you'll have left London.

What a business your redecoration must be! But I feel quite confident that every wheel will revolve with the perfectest precision—every picture will smile—or frown—in his foreordained niche—there will be not even the faintest odour of new paint to greet you.

Your Mother has an eye that commands implicit obedience and a smile that rewards it. All will be carried out “according to—her—plan.” Do tell me what colour the front door is—but don't tell me if it's green. Not that I object, exactly, to a green front door, but I know it would give me a sad sense of disappointment—disillusionment. But it's absurd—impossible on the face of it, your Mother wouldn't tolerate a green front door. She simply couldn't.

The house I want and shall never have has low ceilings, oak beams, Italian carving above and around the open hearths, quaint doorways with steps up or down into every room, odd corners and winding stairs, stained glass and

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

old tapestries, and on all sides glimpses of an old-world garden with moss-covered steps and flag-stones—

What foolishness !

Yours,

*P.S.*—Chris reminds me that Byron had a bad reputation. I tell her there are scores of people who make it their business to ferret out details of the private lives of public men with which they have properly no concern.

What matters it that Byron was morose, mordant, sometimes unmannerly—even uncouth ? He gave us *Cain* and this jewel of wisdom :—

“ . . . . . He who joy would win

“ Must share it ; happiness was born a twin.”

## LETTER IX

London

18th August, 1918.

They kept me two hours at the Medical Board and it was one of the very disagreeablest experiences I have ever endured. But, thank goodness, it was a warm day!

The first doctor was bearded and grumpy. I expect—poor man!—he was weary to death of his most unenterprising job. The second was frightening as a Sergeant-Major. It is true we were a comic squad; certainly not unruly, but utterly ignorant of the kind of discipline we were obviously expected to be acquainted with. I was as innocent of it as the very large coal-heaver who followed me or the small tailor who was dancing and blinking with irritation and anxiety to get back to his work and whom I followed. The third doctor was an agreeable surprise, a delightful chap. Perhaps I say this because he remembered having seen me play some ten years ago. A very good part it was, but his remembrance surprised me for I wore a very disguising make-up and on this occasion literally none of any sort. It proved to be as I anticipated. The Army will have none of me, Redgie. I am Grade 3B, and feel rather humiliated, especially as I took off as many years as I dared and was feeling really rather extra well.

It would be hypocritical to say I am disappointed; but the consciousness of uselessness is not gratifying to the vanity.

And now here I am, dependent on managerial favour for my living and without the least hope, as far as I can see, of winning it. It is true that my side line is in rather more than less flourishing condition, but that is by no means a reliable source of income. I have been invited to work on a melo-



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

drama——Ha, Melodrama ! Now we are there once more let us stay for a few minutes.

What do people mean when they speak of melodrama ?

Obviously they are not thinking of the old play with music, the *drame mêlée du chant* of the French Stage of which I believe *Don César de Bazan* was the first example in, I think, 1841. Frédéric Lemaître perceiving the possibilities of the part of Don César (in Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas*, in which he had created the title rôle) created by his pupil Mélingue, suggested to D'Ennery to make him the central figure of a play. *Don César* was the result and in it the curtain fell on each Act to a concerted piece in operatic form ; there were one or two songs dropped into the dialogue but its construction otherwise was on approved drama lines.

The terms " melodrama " and " melodramatic " are used nowadays as opprobrious epithets—always ! The critics are very fond of them. To find a definition that would satisfy them would dissatisfy them, because it would limit their use of a favourite term of contemptuous abuse.

A good play is one in which a credible and interesting story is unfolded by means of living characters, psychologically developed by incident.

You must allow that.

The story must be credible and interesting or there is no play worth considering.

It must be unfolded by living characters, for human interest is essential.

The characters must be psychologically developed or their untruth fails to convince.

And the development must take place by means of incident or the play is all talk and the audience goes to sleep.

## LETTER NUMBER NINE

*Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, if they did not happen to be written in great verse, would be called melodrama, for it is only the genius of Shakespeare that makes the stories credible. Sometimes this fact irks the critics terribly. They take their revenge, however, by calling an actor whose performance of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* they disapprove “melodramatic.”

Now what do they mean by that?

Simply that he is a bad actor—that his method is wrong—out of tune—over emphatic. Observe that feeble, underacted performances are not melodramatic, though they are just as wicked. Over-emphasis is a fault common even to good actors at first performances, generally the only time the critics see them, a fault that is usually corrected within a week. But critics prefer not to explain—to particularise—to assist by constructive criticism; they must fling mud, and that is in fact what they mean to do in using that word.

Logically the acting in Melodrama should be melodramatic. But no, that would make it too easy. They will praise an actor's performance in a melodrama for being un-melodramatic—very high praise indeed! And listen to this: they will even call Scenery melodramatic!

Now I ask you?

The sane way to use the word—if it must be used—is to allow that any play or scene that affords opportunity for the expression of emotion or passion is dramatic if it be properly and convincingly done and “melodramatic” if it be exaggerated.

This is as true for Comedy as for Tragedy; though the people who are most glib with the word would stare very hard if you called such monkeying as I have seen by the Grave-diggers in *Hamlet* “melodramatic.”

So much for the adjective.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

A melodrama, then, is one in which the author thinks nothing of the logical and psychological development of character but devises his incidents first, regardless of them.

But that won't do, for most of the great acting parts are in melodramas so-called, and they would not be great if they were not psychologically developed—if they were not credible, living beings. I need seek no further for an instance than Mathias in *The Bells*.

Yet this play too falls under the ban and is classed as melodrama with *The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning*.

Is it not a crime to brand these together with the same stigma?—to make no difference in the application of their term of scorn between the good play and the bad—between the perfect acting vehicle and the hotch-potch of impossible situation, illustrated by caricatures of humanity, thrown together without regard to unity, logic or common-sense, which is an insult to intelligence as it is an offence against Art?

For my part I shall continue to call both Drama and avoid the use of a word that has no accepted significance; I shall call Drama good when it fulfils the required conditions and bad when it offends them and leave the use of the offensive term to those who may choose to invest it with whatever measure of opprobrium their spleen suggests to them.

And I hope, Redgie, that you will do the same.

Yours dogmatically,



## LETTER X

London

24th August, 1918.

Paradise bird wall-paper ! I'm afraid I should abominate that. Flowers are pretty bad ; but birds, game or tame, beasts, carnivorous or herbivorous, and fishes, freshwater or salt, seem to me intolerable as mural decoration. The "damnable iteration" of any design irritates, and—like those detestable buttons that pin the upholstery to the backs of railway-carriage seats and suggest illimitable radii, of which any one may be the centre—rivets attention and would ultimately induce mania did not beneficent Providence provide distracting counteraction—or counteracting distraction, whichever you please.

Tell me ; do the pictures still hang, as they did, on the stairway ? Some of them would be shocked, I'm sure, to see themselves on a futurist background : The Morlands and the Cries of London. One of the charms of your letters, my dear Redgie, is a delightful vagueness, which affords ample scope for speculation as to what, precisely, you mean. You use the ellipse with fascinating irresponsibility. Now let me see—Yes, I think I've got the effect of the new dining room ; "a yellowish paper" (I don't like "yellowish ;" it might be primrose or dandelion, apricot or peach, even *café-au-lait* or Bass's Ale, but let that pass) and "a *light* door." Yes, but how light ? White, I can see ; but with the "grey marble mantelpiece"—Yes, it must be white if it must be light. I should prefer walnut stain for the woodwork, but my confidence in your taste is implicit.

I want a whole lot of convincing that it's wrong to do what gives you happiness—when it hurts no one. That's

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

the whole point. We must not hurt others to make holiday for ourselves. But I will never believe it is virtuous to suffer just for suffering's sake. It recalls the old fable that the nastiest medicine is the most efficacious ; a Victorian fallacy, but potent with parents. No one knows what is in the soul of each of us and our knowledge of Right and Wrong—for ourself—is absolute. It is guided by the Spirit of Good that lives in us all, that Spirit that clamours for freedom and invariably attains it when the will is strong enough. Though selfishness is the real sin of the world, the root of all pain, one must be true to one's own Self ; none escapes the penalty for neglecting that. We have each a spiritual Individuality as well as a material Personality and we must keep it sweet and clean : each time we deny the inward conviction of what is really Truth—of what is Right *for us*, we sully it and that is the worst sin of all.

Suicide is not always sin but it is nearly always cowardice—despair of living up to one's ideal ; and that is a passive crime almost as wicked as the active smirching of the Spirit. We are all at liberty to give to others what we will of service—of devotion ; our obligations are few and almost all material ; matters of debtor and creditor ; but the Spirit is free, God-given, a sacred trust ; to be returned, purified as far as may be, by the Thought that guards it from the dawn of understanding to the end. The great Peace lies in the realisation that there is only one best : loyalty to the ideal of one's own soul, faith in the one Good that is absolute—that we call God, the One Thing Positive—like Light that *is*. Darkness, being negative, an absence, merely, of Light, is *not*. So, also, all opposition to one's own ideal of Truth is negative—it doesn't count—it doesn't exist.

This is as true in Art as in Nature. It applies equally

## LETTER NUMBER TEN

to our artistic ideal. What we can't see in Painting, Architecture or Sculpture—hear in Music—feel, with our combined senses, in Drama for us is wrong. I speak as one typifying the average intelligence; I refuse to set myself lower. And I—we—have no use for the dramatist who preaches at us.

Whoever has taught higher lessons in morality than Shakespeare, who never preaches? Shaw does nothing else. Galsworthy is all bias. He tries not to take sides, but invariably his scales are weighted. It might be quite interesting to have a Propaganda Theatre; but it is dishonest to lure the public, under the pretence of amusing them, to see Mr. Shaw spitting venom against England and her social institutions or hear Mr. Galsworthy lecture on the moral obligations of Boards of Directors towards the families of their employees, or the effect of prison routine on the criminal. Charles Reade with *It's Never too late to Mend* did more for prison reform than Galsworthy's *Justice* and entertained hundreds of thousands in the process. But his was a play. *Strife* and *Justice* are not; neither are they Truth for they do not argue their subjects without bias. They are special pleading in dramatic—and dogmatic—form; premises, but no development. The writer postulates: "These things happen. Isn't it terrible!" and then drops the curtain. *Strife* is valuable propaganda for the encouragement of Class-hatred, no doubt; but the Theatre is not Tower Hill—yet!

But the worst crime of all was to inoculate the English Theatre with that ulcerous toxin, Brieux's *Les Avariés*. I refuse to refer to it by the disgusting catchpenny label put upon it as an appeal to a certain class of women and generally to the pornographically minded. The contempla-



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

tion of ulcers, social or otherwise, is an unhealthy occupation—for the layman—and I resent with all my being that unwholesome gynæcological lectures should be served up in stage-play form, labelled “entertainment.” Ibsen’s *Ghosts* has been cited as parallel but it is not. *Ghosts* is primarily a play and a very fine one at that ; and whoever finds suggestion of obscenity in its performance must bring the evil with him to the theatre. It is none the less immoral to produce and trade upon it from that point of view—to advertise it as “banned by the Censor,” and to label it with that pernicious provocative to youthful inexperience : “For Adults only.” I would treat those who do this exactly as I would the German who poisons a well ; and for him I can think of nothing cruel enough—not being myself a German.

My ideal of a home makes you call me “a romantic old sentimentalist.” Yes, I am sentimental in a way ; I hope it is honest sentiment, not sentimentality. The language ought not to oblige us to use the same adjective for two totally different abstractions. I have sentiment about things and places and I consider it neither weak nor foolish. As for being romantic, the word used in conjunction with sentimentalist suggests to me the quintessence of pose—artificiality *in excelsis*—the lackadaisical ballad of the troubadour—the falutin of the Renaissance. I hate to see *Romeo and Juliet* set in that period ; the story, the characters—except Tybalt, who is a relict of the *Renaissance*—are all Elizabethan, the period of action—of daring—of work. The *panache* of Cyrano—of Chicot—of D’Artagnan is not the quality of a romantic ; they are virile, not mawkish, sloppy, sickly. Your romantic “sighs like a furnace with a woeful ballad.” Flamboyance, *brio*, gusto

## LETTER NUMBER TEN

are male essentially ; they are not ridiculous because they are conscious of their humour. The romantic, if he laughs, laughs dismally ; not because a mirthful heart bubbles to overflowing. If he became aware suddenly of his lack of the God-given sense he would instantly develop it to its widest and transmogrify in the glory of his sex—or expire of melancholia on the spot.

You know Rostand's *Les Romanesques* ; Percinet and Sylvette are the romantics ; but Straforel, the gorgeous Straforel ! is no such puny thing. I do not claim to have his wit—his dash—his fertility of intellect and resource ; but at least I may claim to be of his spiritual inclining ; humbly I hobble after him and every chuckle he “*goguenardiset*” (May I coin that ?) finds a sympathetic echo here. I have enjoyed the privilege of trying to play him—Alas ! only in English—if I failed, as was probable, it was not for want of sympathy and—may I claim it ?—comprehension. Please don't call me romantic.

But this word has also another sense : we speak of the young writers who in 1830-50 revolutionised the French Drama ; I mean Victor Hugo, Alfred de Vigny, Théophile Gautier, Hector Berlioz, Casimir Delavigne, Alexandre Dumas as “the Romantics.” They founded a School of Drama that was to supersede the Classic of Corneille, Racine and their imitators, who, until that date, had been the sole purveyors, with Molière, to the *répertoire* of the *Théâtre Français*. Their model was undoubtedly Shakespeare ; and their heroes owe their origin to the Swashbucklers so dear to him and whom he has immortalised in Benedick, Mercutio, Petruchio, Gratiano, Faulconbridge, Antonio (the Sea-Captain) and others. These are romantics in another sense. There is nothing sawney about them.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

English gives us "sentiment" and "sentimentality" and one adjective: "sentimental."

French gives us "*roman*" and two adjectives "*romanesque*" and "*romantique*." It amuses me to apply "*romanesque*" to sentimentalism: "*romantique*" to sentiment.

Chris has fixed up that engagement she hoped for. She leaves me to go on tour again in a fortnight. She will be happier in a modern comedy.

Yours prosaically,



## LETTER XI

London

*1st September, 1918.*

When is a man old enough to kiss his niece in a public place?—a restaurant, for example—anywhere, in fact, except a railway station. There, of course, indiscriminate kissing is permissible, even decorous, though not to my taste. I prefer to disappear before the train starts. To wave a handkerchief in aimless futility as the cars round the bend, while the engine belches black smoke and a shower of cinders, and to feel that every eye is upon you—that all the other idiots have switched off their several points of interest to concentrate on You—It makes one as self-conscious as the newly-wed, who, turning to wave the dutiful hand of connubial benediction to his blissful partner on the front-door step, collides with the lamp-post at the corner and thenceforward limps his crestfallen way to the next “stops here by request.”

But I wander.

Chris has departed. I kissed her quite unself-consciously at Paddington. But this morning when we met for lunch at my little restaurant——I am not in the least influenced by war-time license. Manners are manners; they change, but there are certain fundamentals and no one has a right to obtrude his domestic relations upon the Public. Just as no man would be seen smoking a pipe in the street with a woman he respected. Chris smokes a cigarette after lunch—publicly. Well, I like an Egyptian myself with the coffee. If tobacco means to her what it means to me I am glad she should enjoy it. But don't most women who smoke in public places do it simply in defiance and quite

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without enjoyment? We shall be able to judge by the number we see smoking in the Tube in—say, six years time.

And talking of restaurants and manners; it seems to be the custom now for women to pay not only for luncheons, but for teas and taxis. Don't you think it's rather horrid? Money transactions between members of the two sexes lead always to a wrong sort of familiarity; but in the case of entertainment no transaction can take place. The man who escorts a woman is her host, he understands that, if he is a man, and is prepared for it. If he meets her casually and is not prepared he passes on; but if he accompanies her he assumes the responsibility for her refreshment and means of transit. If she visits a shop he waits outside—unless it happens to be a glove or perfume shop, when he enters and pays. If these customs are changing I am grieved. I am glad I shall be gone before the new ones rule. Meanwhile Chris starts her new engagement to-morrow; she has been rehearsing in town.

By travelling up last night I am killing two birds, for I was able to see Chris off and meet a man, another who wants me to work on his play. I am to see him in the morning before I rejoin the Company. Our first week is over and the results were most satisfactory. Every one seems delighted with the play. Its future depends upon this week, when we shall face an entirely different type of audience. I can't help feeling confident. The first and third Acts have pleased tremendously though the second hangs fire a bit. The last satisfies me, but the Author has an idea of substituting a sugary finish—and the backer backs him.

Curious psychology of an audience that is satisfied if the curtain falls on a happy reunion, even though—as in

## LETTER NUMBER ELEVEN

the case of Pinero's *The Benefit of the Doubt*—it must know that, did it remain up for another two minutes, the trouble must start all over again. One is reminded of Sir Peter and Lady Teazle who resolve that they will “Never! Never! Never! Never quarrel again!” and two minutes later are at it hammer and tongs. How fine Winifred Emery was in that Pinero play; the best thing she ever did. Well, our Author may be right, though I feel that any change must be, artistically, for the worse.

I was unusually comfortable—for me!—on the first night. The words of a new part always worry me terribly. I know at least four excellent actors who can never do themselves justice at first because of this trouble with words, though I know others who no sooner read a part than they seem to know it. I can't begin to memorise until I am quite certain of every thought to be expressed—every change of feeling and mood; so that a part badly written or constructed needs sheer effort of parrot-like cramming. I think few people realise how an actor's anxiety about words may, and often does, spoil his performance, not only on a first night but for a week and even more. And suppose he knows them so thoroughly that he can repeat them mechanically while thinking of other things—in my opinion a first essential to real ability in an impersonation—can he, during the short period usually given to rehearsals, master the other parts and the whole of the play so thoroughly as to be able to gauge the *tempo* and complete technical mechanism? For the performance of a play is very like an unaccompanied opera, not a ballad-opera but the music-drama of Wagner. Imagine a performance of *Siegfried* without a Conductor! That is what the perfect performance of a play amounts to; all the changes of tone and pace



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

must be nicely considered and rendered ; the duets, trios, quartettes and ensembles exactly and perfectly “ set ” and the audience—with whom the players have not rehearsed—is the orchestra : silent, yes, but playing its part all the same ; its emotions forming the accompaniment to every scene, and——But I was wrong, the Conductor is there ; the spirit of the Author, he who alone knows the exact effect to be produced. That is why an author should be always his own producer, but, if he delegates his job, that other becomes the Conductor and must sense exactly what emotions will be expressed by his orchestra (the audience) as accompaniment to his artists’ work and instruct them (the artists) in colour, tone, *tempo*, *crescendo*, *diminuendo* and rest as the Maestro does.

In the times of the great actors, the Classic drama—there was not much great acting outside it—was studied from the earliest days. Hamlet had already played Laertes, Horatio, Rosencrantz and Francisco and probably several other parts as well ; he knew every note, the *tempo* of every scene, in fact the whole score ; his conception was clear ; above all he knew what to avoid. Moreover he had played the Leads first at lesser provincial theatres ; then in the more important centres before, at last, he made his bid for the position that really mattered and so was able to present his finished best for analysis and judgment. First night judgment of our efforts in the present day is not only misleading, it is unjust.

## LETTER XII

London

10th September, 1918.

One may draw safe deductions as to a man's disposition from his conduct over food. Observe how he treats his roll and his napkin ; cast a glance at his plate as the waiter removes it and note his expression as the next course arrives. Watch him as he sips his wine ; that will tell you much, and the way he deals with coffee—Yes, I know you never touch it. Wise Redgie, for its degustation is most character-revealing.

I lunched to-day with the prospective backer of our play ; hence these reflections. Business was entirely satisfactory last week and they are bent on a London production. I told you he regarded me with suspicion ; he is inclined to question my method of book-keeping, and distrusts the negotiations I have already entered into on his behalf with a theatre manager. I don't know what he suspects, but there is something in his mind ; that I got before we had finished the fish. The trouble is he wants a theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue and that is out of the question. With the rumours of a possible Peace the boom is starting and theatres are at a premium. He doesn't understand all the complications of London production and of running a theatre ; the ghastly expense that an ordinary business man may well be excused for regarding, in many cases, as very like blackmail. Who would be a manager ! Upon my soul they have most of my sympathy. Details would only confuse you so I spare them. Sufficient to say all so far is muddle and complication. I am suspected of something vague and I have not the remotest conception

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of what it may be. Well, I am not worrying ; honesty often leads into a muddle—and even through it.

I know you disapprove of my meddling with management. And in your last you say you consider it undignified for me to tinker other people's plays and no doubt you are right, but I have to live somehow. Don't answer me as La Rochefoucauld did the unnecessary person. It is a necessity because of Chris, I must die out of debt and she is my chief creditor ; so if I can't get acting to do I must scrape an income some other how, consequently I turn to commercial use the only asset I have ; which is, so I persuade myself, a sense of the Theatre.

It is no wonder managers don't rush at me ; just consider : my first fifteen years were spent mostly on Drama and Standard plays, though I had good Modern Comedy experience, too, but mostly in outlandish places. But I always preferred the Romantic-Historical and would throw up (poor as I was) any engagement in modern clothes (mine weren't, I couldn't afford a tailor) to play in Costume. I have now, somewhere, my Hessian boots, cut out of American cloth, the conical Directoire hat, fashioned from an old topper ; and the black velvet cape that transformed the second-hand frock coat into suitable equipment for—let us say—Beauséant. This name suggests : “ This castle hath a pleasant seat ” and reminds me of the various makeshifts we used to resort to for changes of tights : penny packets of many coloured dyes not then being on the market. But I will spare you the details. I played everything I could get in the Legitimate from Joseph Surface's Servant to Hamlet, but never an effective part anywhere to matter. Othello at Yeovil is not much good commercially. Now I never heard of an actor making a position



## LETTER NUMBER TWELVE

after he was thirty-five and at that age I was nowhere. Then came an engagement to tour in the provinces with a brilliantly clever play which nevertheless did me an immense amount of harm. It was a very difficult and most unsympathetic part and in a town like—well, let us say—Birmingham, one paper would take the view that I was wonderful, bringing out all the objectionable characteristics with consummate art, etc. You know the sort of stuff they print. That would be in the *Post*, for example. The *Mail* would say I was hopeless, incompetent and thoroughly bad. In Liverpool the *Courier* took one view ; the *Mercury* the other. *The Scotsman* praised while *The Glasgow Herald* annihilated. The Company used to look forward to the joke each Tuesday morning and bet as to which view the leading paper of the town would take. But the effect for me was deadly and it opened my eyes. One printed damning wipes out a thousand encomiums (enconia!). Yes, it opened my eyes wide to a horrible inartistic truth. It's all right to play Iago one night and Mercutio the next—besides Iago gets credit—if Othello lets him be seen—but even Iago (for an actor without a reputation) is, in my opinion, a tactical error for a run. Never play against the sympathy of your audience unless you are forced to by your need of bread and butter. That part did me no end of harm, no one (I mean manager) would believe I could do anything else and as a result I starved, literally, once more. If I remember rightly I couldn't get a part for twenty-two months, and how I lived I can't recall.

It was then I took up tinkering, and through that, ultimately, a decent part. Then an old part in a revival and at last I succeeded in making a home ; and I shall go on tinkering if that's the only way I can keep it. But

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you'll see, Drama will come in again—it's wanted now—and Shakespeare ; and I shall be found useful, though no longer ornamental. Bearing out what I've said above ; I refused recently to play a German in a play that had quite a good run. I felt it would do me more harm than good in the end and that the next manager I applied to would say : " No German in my new play ; " as I know one said to a friend of mine : " No Butler in our next production ; " and to another man I know : " Sorry, old chap, but there's no Parson in this piecee." Even the critics help this damnable method by praising, for example, O. B. Clarence for being " always so good as a curate." Isn't he good in other parts ? Look at his Starveling and his Sir Andrew. I should like to see him as Shallow and I'd risk casting him, and with confidence, as Fluellen. If you're Roy Byford you must reconcile yourself to playing Old Weller or Bumble, but watch him if ever he gets a chance at Sir Toby or even Falstaff. I remember him as a provincial Heavy man in melodrama (so-called). He has been through it. He is an actor. He's a heavy man still, though not in the same sense, for his twenty-three stone rather limit his range. You probably never heard of Billy Hill—talking of weight—the Baillie in *Les Cloches de Corneville* ; old Cattermole ; and, above all, the hypochondriac in *The Pickpocket*. Oh, but he was so screamingly funny. He was an artist and a musician. Byford's Cattermole, with all his breadth and unction, couldn't compare with Hill's. *The Pickpocket* by George Hawtrey reminds me of Charles. Dear old Hawtrey ! An evening with him is always a joy. I have seen *The Naughty Wife* ; the others all forced the farcical note but he was content to play comedy. Ellis Jeffreys was polished as ever. She has one great charm ;

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she smiles with her eyes. Irish, of course, but none the less attractive, or perhaps I should say all the more so, for Irish women, when they are charming, are very charming. Her method reminds me of the finished art of Réjane. Gladys Cooper grows very competent ; each time I see her I feel more hope that here, at last, we may have a real Leading Lady ; Stanley Logan as the lover seemed to me to deprive the wife of all excuse even to contemplate naughtiness. Why is that problem, old, in its modern form, as Sardou's *Divorçons*, always treated with bias ? Wouldn't it be interesting to tackle it, for once, with all three characters behaving decently, and without any maudlin self-sacrifice ?

When "the little Alexandre" invented The Eternal Triangle—it was not he who christened it—I doubt he foresaw the incalculable complications (whose legitimate sum is six) of which his subject was capable. "*Il y a de bon mariages, mais il n'y en a point des délicieux.*" As we are all intent upon seeking *les délices*, even partners of a "*bon mariage*" may find understanding for certain vagaries though they lose sympathy by indulging them. Monsieur remembers perhaps that "*les femmes qui aiment pardonnent plus aisément les grandes indiscretions que les petites infidelitez*"—and plunges accordingly.

I wonder if Hawtrey ever considers how many good parts he owes to Dumas *fil*s—and to Monseigneur le Duc de La Rochefoucauld !



### LETTER XIII

Bournemouth

15th September, 1918.

Lights out at 11, so with the assistance of a very convenient little shaded lamp which I was glad to find in my room, I write in pencil and in bed.

It's pouring with rain and very close.

I've been for a long walk by the sea, beyond Boscombe Pier, watching the effect of the firing that lit up all the sky over the Isle of Wight. I don't feel like Theatre or Music Hall these evenings ; it amuses me to pretend I have nothing to do with the Stage—never have had. I am always proud of it ; but in public conveyances or places where I feel I may encounter the sneer of ignorance or prejudice I never mention it. In this hotel no one suspects me.

I am here to advise with another new author about his play. He is Italian and extraordinarily interesting—speaks English fluently but can't write it. Of course you don't really know a language until you can dream in it, therefore his attempts to express a rather complicated philosophy and illustrate it in dramatic form seem doomed to failure. I have explained this but he persists. I tell him the play will never be acted—that it is sheer waste to employ me, but he is determined. We have devised a method and tomorrow we start operations. His play is written in—well, yes, English words, but it is quite impossible to explain to you the queer use he has put them to. My job amounts practically to translation, so I am to translate and adapt while he stenographs ; but first I have to pull it all to pieces and reconstruct. I call myself a Play Doctor, or as one of my patients said last week, “ a nerve specialist of the

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTEEN

Drama.” This gives you plenty of scope if you wish to say something scathing.

Really I have not much interest in these modern plays—either this, or the other I am shortly to produce. That is not what I went on the Stage for, but it would seem that the end I set out to gain has receded so far into the distance as to be beyond all attainment, even though I were as able as I once hoped to make myself. It may sound futile and merely ungenerous to say there is no acting now—besides it would not be true; but certainly the thing it once was—the thing that attracted me—no longer exists and any attempt to revive it is regarded as disreputable. But you should have seen and heard the audiences in those days; it would have done your heart good. It did mine, and filled me with a wild desire to provoke an audience to a like enthusiasm. Take for example Henry Neville’s exit as Charles Surface in Act IV. of *The School for Scandal*. The audience simply would not allow the play to proceed until he had returned and taken his call. Yes, in the middle of the Act! Most inartistie, eh? True, it might have been, but not as he did it. He used to drop his handkerchief. That was his excuse to return; he recovered it, bowing to Lady Teazle with that inimitable and graceful sweep of his that he only could carry off and which included the audience while it never seemed to take him out of the picture, and finally departed. I am positive that all our critics would shriek at this as most reprehensible. But the Public is there in the theatre to enjoy itself and if it wishes to thank the actor who has given it pleasure and encourage him to further effort, who shall gainsay it? The same thing will happen in Act II. of *David Garrick* after the drunken scene if the actor can act it. The trouble

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is to get back to the atmosphere, but with Henry Neville's little ruse—perhaps handed on from “Gentleman” Smith (the original Charles) for it may be traditional—the atmosphere was not disturbed. Then there was Farren to preserve it; William Farren III, the only Sir Peter Teazle of my time; Archer as Joseph and Ada Cavendish. It is monstrous that we have no School to preserve the Traditions of these Comedies—that to-day it is simply not possible to give an adequate reproduction of the method and business of one of our greatest art possessions, a thing that is unique: the Old English Comedy Manner and the business of the plays. It should have been handed on and kept alive as the *Théâtre Français* preserves the traditions of the Molière plays. Farren is gone; but his son, William Farren IV, is still with us, almost the last link with the past. I could mention one or two more, but only one or two! Yes, it is a lasting reproach to our Theatre that we cannot now adequately stage *The School for Scandal*, *The Rivals*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, *The Country Girl* and some half dozen more. I have seen other Sir Peters: Fernandez, quite unsuited; Hermann Vezin, lacking resilience and humour; Tree, striving as always to avoid tradition—succeeding, but giving nothing worth having in its place; Lewis Ball, admirable, but essentially *bourgeois*; many I prefer to forget and Henry Herbert, far better than most; but Farren was unapproachable. Frank Archer was quite wrong as Joseph—played him as a villain, as most do. I was guilty myself at the first attempt. Sheridan wrote Joseph for John Palmer, nicknamed “Plausible Jack,” and there you have the key-note. Joseph must be plausible, smiling, oily, insinuating, but charming, or the balance is destroyed. Actors—or I suppose I should say producers nowadays—



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seem to forget the play is a Comedy. I have only ever seen one Joseph who convinced me—and, certainly delighted his audience : Baliol Holloway, an excellent actor in nearly every thing. He's acting all sorts of things at Tilbury now, but you'll hear of him doing big work after the War. As Lady Teazle I have seen Ada Cavendish, Winifred Emery, Mrs. Bernard Beere, Mrs. Langtry, Kate Vaughan, Phyllis Terry, Marie Löhr and many others. None seemed to me right and Mrs. Patrick Campbell less right than any. Lady Teazle is a country girl ; they all lose sight of that ; she strives to be a woman of fashion but never succeeds, and fails utterly at last because her heart is touched. They will play the Screen Scene as drama. It is comedy which develops such a true ring of pathos that it charms to tears—which dissolve into a laugh.

Played as drama Charles' banter becomes intolerably bad manners. I have read criticisms that blamed the author for this, which showed that the writers were not qualified to judge the respective responsibility of Author and Actor—but very few of them are. The best Lady Teazle I ever saw was Dorothy Green. And Charles ; to my mind Henry Neville stands alone as Charles, and as Jack Absolute. None of the rest could touch him. And oh, the joy of Farren as Sir Anthony ! Both Forbes-Robertson and Charles Coghlan had the manner, but lacked the spirit of Charles, though I am told Coghlan had it in his young days. Matheson Lang and Robert Loraine did not attempt to catch the atmosphere of the period ; they walked through the part in their own personalities, as they might wear powder at a Fancy Ball. Waller was as bad as Jack Absolute. And when I think of Loraine as Bob Acres ! or Leonard Boyne as Sir Lucius and remember John Maclean—words fail

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me. Maclean was, I think, quite perfect—I can see and hear him now, reading the letter from his “Dear Dalia,”—as he was also as Sir Oliver. Henry Neville as the old man—like Wyndham, he could never act an old man: I believe Charles Mathews was the same—had only that failing in the part; he could not be convincingly elderly. I have never seen a really good Bob Acres. Tom Thorne was never a good actor. Lionel Brough was, at the time I saw him, too soaked in the methods of burlesque and *Opéra bouffe* to get all the effects legitimately; and I missed John S. Clarke—and Jefferson, said to be greatest of all.

We have still one old actress who can play Mrs. Malaprop Mrs. Candour, Mrs. Hardcastle, and that is Claire Pauncefort (whose Mother I saw as Queen to Irving’s Hamlet). I won’t say she is quite as good as Mrs. Stirling but to-day there is none else, and she is better than any of yesterday’s. I prefer her to Mrs. Chippendale—especially as Mrs. Malaprop. Mrs. Billington was altogether too sour. Lottie Venne (as Mrs. Malaprop) was utterly miscast; brilliant as she is, her personality always triumphs over her art and her art is, in fact, to express her personality.

Kate Vaughan as Lydia Languish and Kate Hardcastle was the best I remember in those parts. I offended her by saying I preferred her Lydia to any of her performances; though it was hard pressed by her Peggy in *The Country Girl*. William Farren IV was a most excellent Moody and no doubt would be so still. But to think we have now lost it all—that it is gone for ever. Except Fred Terry there is none left who can even wear the clothes—Yes, one other: William Staveley, who might still instruct the younger generation how to bear themselves—to tie a cravat



## LETTER NUMBER THIRTEEN

—to take snuff—to manage “the nice conduct of a clouded cane”—and the appropriate *flicking* of a lace-edged kerchief. Kyrle Bellew was one of the old ones I have forgotten to name, the next best Charles and Jack to Neville; and Marie Litton, of course, was exquisite; though I was too young when I saw her to form so deliberate an opinion as I do of the others. Do not confuse Kyrle Bellew with the lady who has now, most unwarrantably, taken his name. It is as though I had called myself Adelaide Nielson. He, it was, who last played Claude Melnotte in the West End. For sixty years *The Lady of Lyons* held the stage, and properly played it is by no means dead yet—but can it be properly played now? I doubt it. At the Adelphi it was treated all wrong. Lytton wrote it—designedly, I am sure—in a bombastic vein and in blank verse form, because he knew that as the best vehicle for the effect he visualised. It is not credible that he was very proud of it as poetry but he had every reason to be proud of producing a drama that has probably drawn more people to the theatre than any play, with the exceptions of *Hamlet* and *East Lynne*. When Kyrle Bellew and Mrs. Brown Potter played it they adopted a modern method; that is to say they did not act; they left all to the play, and it is not one that will act itself: some of it is mere bathos unless the actors treat it with art and enthusiasm when it is guaranteed to carry the Public off their feet. But to-day one never sees or hears that, for the simple reason that the poor souls are never given the excuse. Wouldn't they rejoice if they were allowed to be so moved, especially in these dark times. Let any actor be given the chance in some human play, and know how to take it, and the manager also will rejoice that he gave him the opportunity,



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

for the public are ready to respond as generously as they have always done, and always will do when the right note is struck. Acting is "the thing" for all that wrenching from Shakespeare's context of the *cliché* about the play (vide *Hamlet* curtain on Act II). The play must be right, otherwise the part can't be, and when I say "right" I don't mean literary, but a good story, told simply, with the characterisation developed in action. And that reminds me of a debt we owe to Ibsen. He banished the Aside and the Soliloquy, by means of which, until his time, most dramatists developed nearly all character. We have rightly come to regard that method as intolerable—except in verse plays.

By jove, do you know what the time is ?

I must put out my light.

Good night !

## LETTER XIV

Bournemouth

23rd September, 1918.

I don't see why—just because there happens to be a war on—one should be awakened with a start to gaze on a chambermaid who looks like the great aunt of the fossilised *Icthyosaurus* in the British Museum; her real name is Julia. It's difficult to believe that kind hearts beat behind such grotesque physiognomies, or anywhere in their neighbourhood; but the proof of the possibility is in the fact that Julia planted a hot water bottle for me last night, placed it surreptitiously just where I was bound to stub my toe on it. It was kindly meant and duly appreciated when the ebullient volubility induced by the stubbing had subsided, after duly emphatic expression. As it happened, though, the water bottle, welcome as it was, was less necessary than it might have been; for after I had switched off the light and was groping my way to my couch some live ashes from my pipe fell on the carpet and mechanically I put my foot on them—I hope smoking in bed is not counted a vice—so both my feet got warmed. The blister on the P.S. is no more inconvenient than the bruise on the O.P. Many thanks for kind enquiries!

You may consider this all very frivolous, but if you'd spent hours trying to express in periods—more or less flowing, though yet with the colloquial touch—another man's philosophy which you had first to digest and then adapt from its Latin expression, after having translated the gesture and disentangled the inspiration from the bunkum (and there's a fair dose of both) you'd understand the reaction that is leading slowly but surely to the disintegration of my reasoning apparatus. I grow moody and self-centred, no

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

longer take kindly interest in my fellows. I have ceased to speculate as to which of the three ladies at the C. table it is who every evening plays *The End of a Perfect Day* as prelude to a pianoforte recital, which includes Rubenstein in F (played in the manner of the old-fashioned barrel-organ ; you can picture the monkey grinning), *The Last Rose of Summer*, *The Blue Danube*, *Here we are Again* and *Where did you get that Hat ?* It may be the fluffy-haired one with the elongated waist ; or she of the washed-out complexion with the high shoulders ; or the little snub-nosed brunette with the high-pitched giggle—I shall never know. The pale-faced man with the smoked glasses, which he occasionally removes to discover poached-egg eyes—overdone, that stare at nothing and derive no satisfaction from the prospect (I believe he uncovers merely to air them) no longer intrigues me. Even the waitress with such a prodigious squint that you can't tell whether she's thinking of the *hors-d'œuvres* or the savory, no longer finds me speculating as to whether she is going to dive down the service passage opposite, or swoop to the table behind me, where feeds the pinch-nosed, bespectacled Nurse, who, with metallic tone and gleeful gloating, inflicts revolting reminiscence upon her meek, query-eyed and knotty-browed companion. I shall essay a monograph one day on the Healing Influence—and otherwise—of the personality of the nurse. Nor can I listen with my accustomed and judicial impartiality to my two neighbours who invariably hold post-mortems on last night's Bridge. The little one with the blond moustache and the deprecating manner is so apologetic and deferential that I'm positive he's a dark horse, and I choose him for my partner in preference to the bearded one with one watery eye and one monocle (eyes are very myopic it seems in



## LETTER NUMBER FOURTEEN

Bournemouth) a bass voice and a cocksure manner.

I simply couldn't keep this up. It is the severest test of my powers of concentration—never my strong point—that I ever endured. For nine and three-quarter hours yesterday I paced up and down the room and dictated a whole Act and smoked a whole box of matches in the process. There is another Act to do. My author has writer's cramp and house-maid's knee—in his elbow and I have parson's throat and incipient softening of the brain.

Forgive all this nonsense. My method seemed the only way to tackle the job, at any rate the quickest. Three Acts of the play are translated and reconstructed. One remains yet to be done and then I return to town. I am really interested now and don't want to drop the thread until it is finished, so we shall work late to-night.

I am discovered.

An actor of my acquaintance accosted me before lunch in the lounge of this hostelry. He is one who remembers that I was a Super with him in the early days and forgets he was a Super with me; for he is prosperous, Redgie, and prosperity has given him mental indigestion. He's the sort that corners the oxygen,—talks everlastingly of his ability and his salary, and the disgusting part of it is—and this is where my envy, hatred and malice come in—he does earn a large salary and deserves it for he can act. He is unable to understand that I prefer the quiet of this place to the clatter of a more popular hotel. It is a failing of mine, I suppose, that though I enjoy observing the mass I detest to be of it. My friend is of those who plunge noisily into the mass and insist that it shall observe him. It does; and that makes him perfectly happy. Still he can act, and for me that covers many sins—if the poor man

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has any except our besetting one of blatancy, and that mustn't be counted a sin in these days or there won't be found saints enough to judge the sinners.

Was it always so? I think not.

The old actors lived apart but they were not blatant. It is said of us that we have no morals, the implication being that those we have are bad; but for sheer dirtiness of mind commend me to the world outside the Theatre, especially that kind who try to hang on to it but don't properly belong. I refer, of course, to the morals of the old actors; the new ones are of irreproachable decorum, that goes without saying; they are as moral as the society in which they scintillate—on the golf-course.

But there are fashions, I suppose, even in morals.

Or is it that we insist on larger license and then, to save our faces, invent a new moral code to endorse it?

Steam displaces horse-power and itself gives way to motor traction; in everything the new fills the gap left by the passing of the old; but in our business, no! What passes leaves a blank. The lost is never replaced.

This is tragic, for I am convinced that if the public of to-day could see *The Bells*, *Rip Van Winkle* (Planquette's Opera), *The Silver King*, *The Magistrate*, *The Harbour Lights*, *Drink*, *Sweet Lavender*—to name only a few—done as they were originally, with Irving as Mathias; Fred Leslie as Rip; Barrett as Denver; Cecil and Clayton as Poskett and Lukyn; Terriss as Dave Kingsley; Warner as Coupeau and Edward Terry as Dick Phenyl, each would create as great a *furor* as in the days of their production.

Make no mistake: I do not ask for the revival of these plays; in no case could it be satisfactory, the art of playing them is lost—dead as Rule Britannia!

## LETTER XV

London

8th October, 1918.

We are horribly congested with the Fair in Trafalgar Square, and a financial magnate of our world, said to be unable either to read or write, seeing the huge placards: "BUY NATIONAL WAR LOAN" is supposed to have remarked; "Damn that fellow Charlie Cochran, he's got ahead of me again!"

But Lloyd George is a bigger booster than even Cochran, and a greater opportunist, which is saying a lot. But Cochran, for all his commercialism, has an artistic conscience and the other—well, he's a great artist, I'll allow. It has been said of our Celtic demagogue that he can "charm a bird off a tree;" but when the bird has forsaken that friendly support it is liable to find itself with clipped wings, falling stone-like to earth. Our Welsh Wizard is all bluster and no fulfilment—impressive but never sincere, for he lacks principle and is guided merely by an intuitive sense of what his audience most wishes him to say.

You tell me you had thought of poor Kate Vaughan as a burlesque artist of the old Gaiety days. It is true I should say that all who saw her then would never forget her dainty grace and she will ever live in my memory as I saw her in *The Forty Thieves* as Morgiana, "morgianarally known as Morgy" (Is that H. J. Byron or Robert Reece?), but she had a long career in legitimate work afterwards, mostly in the provinces. She started management at the Opéra Comique in partnership with George Edwardes in the Spring of 1888, I believe it was, and produced *The School for Scandal*, *The Rivals*, *She Stoops to Conquer* (I think) and *Masks and Faces* (I know). Though



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not, properly speaking, an Old Comedy, this last play by Charles Reade and Tom Taylor almost deserves to be ; it must be acted with the same manners, for its period is about 1745. Kate Vaughan was charming as Peg Woffington, but perhaps rather too delicate—too much like a Dresden china shepherdess. I saw Lady Bancroft—"Mrs." in those days—play it at the Haymarket and was conscious of some disappointment, though the production and the rest of the cast were superior to those at the Opéra Comique. In that theatre I also saw Mrs. Bernard Beere as Peg, but found her miscast. Neither was I satisfied with that very clever actress Madge McIntosh in the part, nor with Wynne Matthison, who was temperamentally unsuited. From this you will perceive that, in my judgment, Peg requires very exceptional treatment. The large humanity strongly dashed with the spirit of roguery that characterises the part is apt to get lost in the Leading Lady attitude. Never was there a grateful and easy (in most respects) part that needed more real acting. Good as it is it simply won't play itself. The play is full of good parts. As Sir Charles Pomander Forbes Robertson was ideal, with both Mrs. Bancroft and Kate Vaughan ; and I particularly remember the brilliant study of Colley Cibber, "old beau—very curious !" by Charles Brookfield. This part was played by Lionel Brough on more obviously comic lines at the Opéra Comique. The two critics Snarl and Soaper and Mabel Vane seemed to me quite perfect at the Haymarket as played by Henry Kemble, Frank Wyatt and Eleanor Calhoun. But the great part, after Peg, is Triplet and never have I been quite satisfied with any I have seen. Of course I missed Ben Webster, but in my recollection Bancroft was the best and, after him, I think came Brookfield,

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who, however, lacked pathos—which you might say would put him out of Court altogether, but somehow it didn't. Neither Fernandez, Neville nor Ben Greet could possibly look the dejected half-starved old actor, and the last of these clowned abominably. Fernandez was too hard and Neville too comfortable. This play was always a great favourite with me.

Another real Old Comedy I am very fond of is *The Road to Ruin*. Edward Compton included it in his répertoire ; also *David Garrick*, which is spurious Old Comedy.

The first I saw at the Vaudeville but was not satisfied. Charles Warner, save for certain peculiarities, was an excellent Harry Dornton ; Lewis Ball (with Compton) as Old Dornton was one of the finest performances I can remember, an exquisite picture of paternal solicitude and pride. Goldfinch was, perhaps, the best thing Compton did, but his Manner—save in that part—was not the real thing. Even his Garrick—that cast-iron certainty—was unsatisfactory. His passion for decking himself with brooches, laces and ribbons savoured too much of Fancy Dress. One could never feel that he lived his period. But he made much money and from his Company came many accomplished actors ; yet as a School of Old Comedy it left much to be desired. Sidney Valentine won golden opinions for his Joseph Surface from the Press, but his performance was too heavy for my taste. David James, that most excellent actor, was the Goldfinch at the Vaudeville, where also I saw Edward Righton play it, but did not care for him. But David James as Old Ingot with Wyndham—What a performance ! I can see him now ; every emotion, from astonishment, anger relenting into kindness and parental pride and flooding into large-hearted generosity



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was plainly shown in his silent scene as the proud old vulgarian. William Farren III gave a totally different—rather acid and pinched—reading, but equally convincing if not so profoundly touching. Just because Garrick is such a safe part I have never seen one who entirely filled it. I missed Sothern; of Compton I have spoken; even Wyndham disappointed me. I had seen him as Jack Rover in *Wild Oats* years before and questioned his Old Comedy touch. In that play I first saw Mary Moore; quite charming, indeed alluring, as the little Quaker. Blakeley was naturally grotesquely comic as the old Quaker, and David James ideal as the sailor, John Dory.

When I think of Wyndham's numberless triumphs in touch-and-go comedy and his perfect performances of the middle-aged *raisonneur* in numerous plays, I grieve to think that his fame rests chiefly upon what I regard as one of his least accomplishments.

Another disappointment was Fred Leslie's Garrick, played once for his benefit at the Gaiety. It was a single performance and therefore should not be severely judged, but I had grown so accustomed to find him brilliant in all he attempted that I was somewhat dashed, yet I still think him the best Garrick I have seen. I missed Irving as Doricourt and Ellen Terry as Letitia Hardy in *The Belle's Strategem*. I grieve there-for. I saw this play at the Court with Harcourt Williams and Leah Bateman and did not much care for it. Dumas' *Mariage sous Louis Quinze*, translated by Sidney Grundy, as *A Marriage of Convenience*, needs the Old Comedy manner and Terriss played Monsieur le Comte to perfection. Waller did not compare with him. I did not admire Winifred Emery in this *genre*, either as Comtesse de Candale, Lydia Languish, or Miss Hoyden.



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This takes me back to the Vaudeville and reminds me of *Joseph's Sweetheart*, *Sophia*, and *Clarissa*. H. B. Conway played Joseph Andrews, he was a very handsome man, but, as I remember him, not very talented. I don't think this part called for much acting, however, and he was adequate. The best performance was Miss Vane's Lady Booby. Tom Thorne was Parson Adams and not too happy in it. He was often monotonous and preached; though at his best as Partridge in *Sophia* (a most grateful part), I thought him rather good. Kate Rorke played Sophia Western and was sweet, but she never appealed to me as did her sister Mary. But this play depended on Tom Jones. I saw three different actors in the part. Leonard Boyne was good but not striking. Charles Warner was better, but marred, as I always felt his performances in straight parts were, by certain peculiarities, notably a sort of *bravura* (if I may use a musical term) in his method of delivery that suggested affectation. But Charles Glenney was best, a really fine performance; he gave us a kind of dunderheaded good humour that was at the same time both foolish and lovable. It touched humanity, one forgave and sympathised. Of *Clarissa* adapted by Robert Buchanan I remember little but the fact that Lovelace was an overwhelming part, the sort of part a young romantic actor longs for and that comes only to the favoured few. In it T. B. Thalberg made his first important London appearance and despite certain natural graces and a charm of personality, failed, I consider, to do anything like justice to it. In recent years we have had *Monsieur Beaucaire*, which, though a Powder play, belongs more to Romantic Drama than Old Comedy. I mention it because it is really a new version of *The Lady of Lyons*, which somehow has come to be classed with the Old Comedies. Though

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Beau Nash figures in it and the scene is set in Bath it has no atmosphere or sense of period in its writing : neither was there any attempt to secure them in the performance. The part of Beaucaire is what actors call very fat ; it was probably the best thing Lewis Waller did. Another play of the same type is *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, memorable for Fred Terry's perfect Old Comedy Manner. He is the only actor of note, the last, except old Staveley, who has preserved it.

No ; I am forgetting William Farren IV, whose great-grandfather was in the original cast of *The School for Scandal* at Drury Lane in 1777, and who is, no doubt, the only living soul who remembers all the traditions. I acted with him over thirty years ago ; a fact he has, no doubt, forgotten.

## LETTER XVI

London

22nd October, 1918.

Fearful uproar in the Club to-day. Tripe and onions provided for the coupon-less was under-cooked; cottage pie (half coupon) was dried up; whiskey sold out; beer not come in; and, to crown all, the plum pudding announced on the *ménù* proved to be plum tart—and very tart. I carry sugar in a bottle. I left the members “tearing up the benches.”

Which reminds me of the O.P. riots at Covent Garden, but we shall never know the Old Prices again.

When I think of the paradise in which we existed before the War! It cost nothing a week to live, we had no cares and no taxes! Why can't we know how happy we are when we are happy?

The true equality now is among those who eat together—it used to be drink. At one time we said: If I drink with a man we are friends, but that has been abused—owing, no doubt, to the quality of the liquor. If an Arab offered you salt and it turned out to be sulphate of soda you would infer that his designs were not honest. So I may feel about the man who offers me whiskey to-day, and as to beer—!

But why must we have an expensive Controller with an expensive staff to fix the price of food? The matter of prices — of keeping them normal, that is—is really quite simple, a question entirely for the Police. All that is necessary is to make the laws more stringent against conspiracy.

Listen while I expound:—

There is beef for sale—precious little, I understand, but there *is* beef. I am not going to refer to the cost of rearing



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the cattle—what I shall say applies equally to that—but consider them as beef in the butcher's hands. Now we are all concerned to get our beef as cheaply as possible and the Controller has been appointed to see that the butcher doesn't swindle us—if he wasn't appointed, as seems more probable, to give him and his office-ful of satellites jobs at our expense—but there is really no need of him, for observe Butcher A sells beef at an exorbitant price; Butcher B. undersells A, but still pockets a big profit; Butcher C. undercuts B and gets a reasonable return. Naturally we all patronise Mr. C. But, you say, it would not happen thus; they would all charge the exorbitant price exacted by A. But that isn't human nature, nor is it in accordance with the Law of Economy; for, unless there be collusion, someone content to make a fair profit—fair to himself as to the consumer—always crops up to undersell the profiteer and prices find their reasonable level. I say “unless there is collusion,” a secret agreement between traders to *keep* the prices up. That is where the Law should step in. I would condemn with its utmost rigour—indeed with a terrifying ferocity—anyone proved guilty of conspiring with another to defraud a third party or the Public. Conspiracy is the dirtiest kind of cowardice; but as our Laws stand they are positively incentive to conspiracy in scores of different forms and our hands are continually in our pockets shelling out to the conspirators.

Take the little part of the world in which I live; the dastardly methods of Trades' Unionism encouraged by the license the Law allows has persuaded our Actors' Association to desire a share of such immunity from the penalties against conspiracy and wish to become a Union; that is to say a menace, a bludgeon to coerce somebody—in this case it

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can only be the managers. They wish to impose a minimum wage for the performance of something they cannot guarantee, in other words to put a premium on incompetence.

The bricklayer used to lay from six to seven hundred bricks as a day's work. Now his Union demands for him about 200 per cent. more wages for laying three hundred bricks and calls that a day's work.

So it will be in our business. Give anyone who chooses to call himself an actor a guaranteed minimum of three pounds a week and every one of lazy habits who may consider ours a *jolly* life will crowd into the profession and bilk the manager as the bricklayer bilks the builder. If he happen to have fifty or a hundred pounds a year of his own it gives him splendid independence added to a minimum wage he has neither the training nor ability to earn; and soon the competent artist will be squeezed out by the crowd of half-fledged semi-novices eager to undersell him. It was years before I earned three pounds a week and if I wasn't fully competent when I did get it at least I was experienced.

But Trades' Union principles; that is to say, rules that license conspiracy of one group against another—or against an individual—will never work in connection with an Art; the only thing they encourage is slacking. Imagine the Shop Steward supervising Rodin—or Liszt—or Sargent. It seems to me that those who propose to apply them to Acting are deliberately seeking to squeeze the last breath of Art out of our calling, weakened as it is by commercialism and the lack of guiding inspiration from a Chief, who, like Irving, has gained universal respect by his eminence as an artist and dignity as a man. That none has risen to take

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Irving's place is the calamity from which we suffer to-day and which encourages these communist principles.

The true aristocrat has ever been the true socialist.

This sounds like a paradox, but it isn't.

From the moment the aristocrat becomes an oppressor he ceases to be an aristocrat, for he has lost Reverence for God's creation, his fellow man, and without Reverence there cannot be Dignity, and lacking Dignity he cannot be the Best (*ἄριστος*).

The aristocrat's essential qualities are that he "wipes away all tears" and to his "own self" is "true."

Does not the possessor of these two qualities sum up in himself all that is best in humanity?—embrace and exemplify all the highest tenets of Religion and Politics?

I think so.

These two dicta of Christ and Shakespeare are the Way and the Light to human perfection.

This is a sermon not a letter. Excuse it.

I get carried away when there is question of the dignity of the Art I love.

Yours,

P.S.—Peace!

*Please*, not yet!—though they say that Germany is crumbling internally and that an armistice may be arranged in a month. Yet I cannot think they will accept what I am confidently informed is Foch's "irreducible minimum" without a long diplomatic struggle. One condition is that 150,000 men march to Berlin.

I'll drink red wine that day!

P.P.S.—Please get it firmly in your head—and in Marie's—that 'flu is only a newspaper scare, for which someone deserves prosecution. Of fifty cases, one doctor said,



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only two were Influenza and forty-eight slight chill and nerves !

*Think* sickness and it shall surely visit you. *Think* health and your will for it shall create it.

Thought rightly governed is a supreme force ; I learned that years ago.

Christian Science, you say.

But my Faith is not quite—or only—that.

Christian Science to the many connotes Healing by Faith and nothing more. My interest in its precepts, in so far as I understand them, is aroused rather by what I consider its larger claims—not that I deny faith-healing. I believe, indeed, that there is no healing without faith. The medical faculty is prone to regard a patient as merely a body. Christian Science blunders equally in ignoring—in fact *denying*—even the existence of the body. But Christian Science, as the science of directing to its best use our consciousness of the Power of Good in all the traffic of existence—as the science of right thinking and just dealing, in short, as the theory of Christianity in active practice as a sound investment with gilt-edged security, appeals to me in spite of the fact that I do not expect it to save doctors' fees or Life Insurance premiums.

## LETTER XVII

London

7th November, 1918.

To-day is historical, I suppose, or will be, but it leaves me with a dull sense of dissatisfaction. That prediction of which I wrote to you was too good to come true. My spirits are dashed. An armistice is to be declared within a few days. I cannot put into words my fear of what seems too hasty settlement. Once let the Germans get the Allies to talk round a table during an armistice and they, not we, will have won this War and within a few years will start preparing for the next.

For all time the Germans will boast that they had the world against them yet no enemy set foot on the sacred soil of the Fatherland—and it will be true !

They were too wily to fight to a finish—to weaken themselves so as not to be able to recuperate quicker than the Allies. Not a building, not a cabbage-patch of theirs has suffered ; but you'll hear them squeal, if not in triumph then in hypocrisy—while France groans in anguish ! But whether they beg, pray, laugh or whine *never* trust them. They don't know the meaning of sincerity—never have and never will—their actions are lies like their words in the past, to-day and everlastingly.

Put no faith in their Red Flag ; it is *camouflage* like their abuse of the White.

That no more brave lives are to be spent is the sole—and enormous—compensation. Yet it does not compensate for the betrayal of that ideal for which already so many have been sacrificed. For the rest, I believe it will be found that we have achieved only ghastly failure. We have not even the parade of Victory.

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At 5 p.m. all who were in the Club stood and drank solemnly "To the King!" To me it seemed a mockery.

I can't resist a certain feeling of admiration for the Boches, unclean as they are, for they possess the crowning virtue—if only it had something honest to crown—they are patriotic. Their slogan: "*Deutschland über Alles*" does not bear the meaning we have chosen to give it. Our newspapers have made use of it, in their misinterpretation, to try and stir patriotic feeling here, as politicians use an election cry, such as "Chinese Slavery" or some such nonsense. They have pretended it meant: "Germany must dominate other nations!" instead of interpreting its real sense: "In my German heart the Fatherland stands first!" That is a noble sentiment and we as a nation should be the better for a spice of it. Who has no ideal of Patriotism—of Loyalty to his country—can have none for his town—nor his home—nor his family—nor his friends. He is a soulless clod. We have found him in these last years, fouling the air of England under his various aliases of Pacifist, Home Ruler, Conscientious Objector. No doubt he exists under different guises in other lands; but that spirit does not flourish in Germany. It is true that, as I have said, their patriotism has nothing honest to crown; a malign entity, cloaked in imperial purple, which soon may be a red rag (though I doubt it), but that cloak, whatever its texture or colour, will always swathe a potentiality, heartless and conscienceless; calculating, cruel, fawning, obsequious and false; a menace to all Peace and the everlasting Scourge of Humanity.

I found Mrs. Silver snivelling. I asked why? She said: "Well, you see, sir, it isn't victory."

I saw a Tommy snatch off his cap and drop-kick it.



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Insubordination !

It was inevitable. It will be the note throughout the Country.

We've been *done*.

Why, good heavens, Redgie, Chris used to wake up in her sleep ten years ago when there were fireworks at the White City—start up and cry : “ Is it the Germans ? ”

I knew it must come and so must thousands of others, the politicians included. I wonder how history will judge them. It is inconceivable that it will acquit them of responsibility for this appalling *débâcle*.

France knew.

Whoever that thought for a moment could have doubted ? Surely one judges a nation as one does an individual : from a knowledge of his past it is impossible to avoid just deduction as to his conduct in the future.

Take that awful play of Barrie's ; the most depressing thing I have ever witnessed in a theatre—not excepting the Lancashire Drama, such as *Rutherford and Son*, for example—look at the utter hopeless misery it exposes ; for all the artificiality of its sugary end, which the thinking mind refuses to accept.

“ The fault, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars

“ But in ourselves that we are underlings.”

Just as Barrie drove home to us by analogy the devastating truth of his theory of Hopelessness ; so, by their conduct through the generations, have the Germans driven home to all who cared to observe the innate wickedness of their theory of Pan-Germanism.

It is illogical, you say, for me to admire patriotism in the individual and yet condemn the same spirit when developed as the composite expression of a nation. But

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it is not their desire for supremacy I hate, but the unscrupulous means their tortuous mind invents to win it.

But perhaps I take the Germans too seriously. Persons with no sense of humour should never be taken seriously ; it flatters their vanity.

We were too serious at the Club when we drank to the King.

The King is not serious—at least I hope the man is not ; there is no question about the humour of his kingship.

He wears the crown “as an extinguisher,” as Chesterton said. It is true he said it of George the Third, not the Fifth, but there is probably more truth in it to-day since the passing of the Parliament Act.

As for Germans, they are funny ; but I noticed at school that the funny fool is usually vicious and a bully. All Europe has submitted to their bullying for nearly two centuries. I have no patience with “Hang the Kaiser !” You can’t hang a spirit and it is the spirit of the whole nation that needs gibbeting. We tolerated the Arch-bully Frederick and always since every little Deutscher has made him his model. I should be sorry for Fritz if he hadn’t got intellectual hydrophobia and every other filthy disease, mental as well as physical.

The only way to deal out Justice to the Germans is to make them the bond-slaves of Europe for a hundred years, after first breaking their spirit by a military display ; the one thing they do understand. Then set them to clean out the sewers of the whole continent ; reconstitute Poland ; get them hammering and riveting in every dockyard ; make them rebuild what they have destroyed—so much of it, that is, as is reconstructable ; they can’t rebuild Louvain, the beauty of Dinant or Reims, for there is no

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reconstructing a desecrated fane any more than it is possible to destroy its spirit—they should work under Allied overseers ; cut down their forests to give us the wood we need, while the whole population are put on army rations. They mustn't develop industries that compete with ours, for we must have the advantage of finding them in boots and cloth, linen and food—except grain and cattle raised in their own land under our supervision—to be paid for by their labour ; and the inter-Allied debts should be liquidated immediately, as far as may be, by confiscation of the hoard at Spandau or wherever else they keep their loot.

What does it matter what becomes of the Kaiser ? Above all the mistake of making him any kind of martyr must be avoided. His gibbet would be a monument, a rallying point, a fiery cross to stimulate their next attempt—for there will be a next ; be sure of that. We are too squeamish to take measures to prevent it ; too Germanised since William III (wasn't it ?) brought German mercenaries here and let them propagate their filthy stock in our midst, and since we invited the Elector of Hanover to rule us.

We imported their method of Education, instituted, in their case, for the specific purpose of controlling all opinion to the political end at which they aimed, but disastrous here—as everything German has been always—for it has become a weapon in the hands of England-haters (financed, most probably, by Germany) to foment Class-hatred and disrupt the State.

But why do I say all this ?

One may hope for justice in a personal matter in an English Court of Law, but never for England in international politics.



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The idea of doing that play in London is abandoned. I am not sorry. Really the people were too trying.

The new one of my Italian friend is revised and finished. I don't think it will ever be acted.

Why write it then?

Why does one strum the piano for hours without an audience? Why paint a picture that will never face criticism? Why do you lounge there on your sofa by the window scribbling and never show me the result?

Because, though work for the sake of working is useless waste of time, work for the sake of the work is helpful—uplifting.

Literary people are in sore straits; I mean the rank and file. I know, not only by my own friends, but through the agencies for whom I do a little.

As for the actors, like the farmers, they always complain. I suppose there are some bad farmers who could raise nothing even though they combined with farming the faculty of Clerk of the Weather.

I won't press the point of the suggestion or I may feel the prick.

## LETTER XVIII.

London

24th November, 1918.

I have a letter from Chris.

Can anyone else put your hat on for you? Is it possible for another hand to adjust it with that nice precision that a touch of your own finger gives it? I think not. Very well, then, who shall presume to settle our opinions for us?—much more difficult, surely, to fit into our heads than hats on to them.

I have always tried to remember that in offering advice or suggestions to Chris. I try never to dictate. I know that if I say so-and-so *is*, that she will take my word for it. But as Truth lies at the bottom of a well so very deep as to be almost unfathomable, I realise that I may never have reached it. No doubt she will outgrow this very *démodé* deference to paternal dogma, but woe betide him who destroys her faith in me! It is wicked to destroy a faith, even a misplaced one. I wouldn't take the responsibility.

What does Chris say?

Truly, Redgie, I am more concerned with what she does not say. I smell a love affair. This is serious, though, of course, it must not be so treated, but it affords ample food for speculative thought. The gentleman must be seen—if I am not mistaken and there is a gentleman. There was once one who wasn't. He had a certain glamour. Oh, yes, he was attractive in a way and Seventeen is not very discriminating; but he had no business to let his hair grow over his collar and into his eyes if he had a partiality for roast beef. That did him. There are not many excuses for overgrown hair and roast beef is the worst I can think of. Chris survived that disillusionment. But this time

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—I dread the lure of propinquity in an unfortunate hour, for, obviously, he is a member of the Company.

Life is a very beautiful thing as it ought to be—as Seventeen ought to live it—simply, gaily, harming none, trusting all, but the simpler the soul the more easily deceived; and yet, no; purity makes no bargain, takes no precaution, it just looks Truth in the eyes without flinching. But—there is always a but. We have been so happy together that I grow nervous. Can it last? I am not superstitious, but I never oppose a superstition, there may be something in it. Friendship is a sheet anchor and I have tried to make it ours. *But* (here it is) there must be other friendships; one that will be bigger than all things. It will seem the same at first, but it won't be real friendship. That must be based on equality; friends must live on the same plane, see with equal eyes, discuss from an agreed stand-point and Sex is a positive barrier to that. Man and woman can never meet on an equality. Their relations must ever be much more or far less. It is because these relations have, for so long, been founded on deception—free, open and acknowledged very often, but none the less, for the time, at least, intended to deceive—that they have been, in the main, so unsatisfactory.

The average man is rooted somewhere; he develops, naturally, but research can discover his fundamentals. Woman is forever shifting her ground. When the two contemplate a lasting relationship the girl's thought is always: "Shall I be happy?"—It is in life as it is in plays and books—never: "Shall I make him happy?" Whereas the decent man's thought is: "Shall I make her happy?" and that unselfishness, if it could be mutual, would be the source of all true happiness in the marriage state.



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But nothing in the affairs of love must ever become a habit, nothing taken as a matter of course ; habits become shackles and love that is shackled grows restive and the irk engenders cancer.

But I go too fast and too far.

Chris' *affaire du cœur*—if there be one—will evolve, no doubt, in the usual way—which she will be sure is unique and Father will play his usual *rôle* with what grace his fogeydom allows him.

You see I contemplate surrender, which is tantamount to admitting defeat. I succumb to the common vice of Drift. We elect to drift and then blame the Universal Scheme because we have lost the individuality we have voluntarily relinquished. We are all talking now of the end of War, as though life were not a perpetual battle—armistice worse than defeat. Rest from strife is no less than decay. And this is as true mentally as it is physically : there is no “resting on the oars” ; to stop pulling against it is to retrogress with the current.

Tell the Princess not to fear cows—nor to wander in strange pastures with her ferocious hound. Cows are constitutionally inquisitive though, if you read their eyes, you will perceive that their intentions are innocent : but they do not admire nervy maidens and they resent the aggressive canine.

I am glad to hear of Marie's engagement and congratulate her as I do her manager on his discernment. I trust the part may give her scope to prove to him that he has the best of whatever bargain he may have made with her : I shall look forward to seeing her in town and trust she will command if, in any way, I can serve her.

Yes, I read *Thoughts and After Thoughts* and found it

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singularly unequal. Tree needed always a butt for his satire—an audience to applaud his wit. Though extraordinarily large-hearted and kindly in intimate relations, the presence of People always awoke in him the desire to shine—at no matter who's expense. On being asked once his opinion of modern criticism, he replied: "I have no use for criticism, fulsome flattery is good enough for me." This so exactly expresses the man that you might be disposed to consider it a yarn, but I heard him say it.

I understand his inequality in the book. At first he would imagine an audience and score a few points happily; but he had little imagination really and the absence of applause would paralyse him, he would grow lame—halt—flounder—and founder. In later years in producing a play he was bored stiff by the time he got to the first night. His joy was in the last week of rehearsals, when—in that cruel vein of his—he would score off some unfortunate supernumerary or actor who was afraid of him. I can recall examples. And so, in writing, I can imagine his interest trailing off in the absence of a sycophantic train to snigger at his "hits."

I remember him stopping me once in the Haymarket, his arms full of newspapers. It was the morning after a production at His Majesty's that had been a failure and he wanted my opinion of the opinions; he wanted it, that is, only so far as it would flatter him. As we talked he perceived the approach of a notorious sycophant and had no further use for me. His pose of abstraction was really the excuse for an extraordinary lack of manners, though he could play the sycophant too upon occasion.

I spent hours alone with him in the Dome discussing the Drama of the *Romantiques*. Curiously, he had a great

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ambition to play Chicot, but could never find a convincing vehicle. He had a wonderful bust of Dumas in the Dome that I envied much.

Yes ; we will talk of Tree and Coquelin, Phelps, Lemaître, Du Maurier, Talma, Kean, Hawtreys, Macready, Fechter, Irving and Mélingue.

I believe there is a boom coming in Shakespeare ; everywhere one reads of it and hears it discussed. People go from all parts to the Old Vic. I saw *Macbeth* there last month. I was impressed by a girl who played Lennox. Ernest Milton was *Macbeth*, rather overweighted, but I liked some scenes, though I doubted the artistry of the " adventitious aid " he derived from a grey wig for the later acts. Lady Mac. I did not care for. The best performance I ever saw there was of *King John*. Russell Thorndike I thought particularly good ; especially in that wonderful last scene where the whole atmosphere was admirably impressive (Ben Greet produced). I preferred it to Tree's production in which, with far greater advantages, it just didn't come off. Waller was the Faulconbridge at His Majesty's, but it was not as good as his Hotspur. Julia Neilson looked magnificent as Constance and was to a certain degree impressive, but she lacked the Grand Manner. I was disappointed with Thorndike's sister at the Vic. of whom I had heard so much. She was shrewish.

I like your aphorism, Redgie: "So long as we don't let Disappointment make us bitter it makes us better." I copy it to help memorise it.

It is true for all around us we see Success creating mental anæmia.

Hardship brings out character to which nothing is so trying as prosperity. The truth is that character is formed



## LETTER NUMBER EIGHTEEN

by heredity, upbringing and association and the furnace of Experience either melts or tempers it according to its mettle. The blaze of Fame is more spiritually fierce than the crude flame of Failure ; only the purest native metal can withstand it.

Your Archdeacon is a humorist—or a pig. I can't believe your sense of humour failed, so he must be a pig. I understand his alarm if you were misinformed as to his intentions ; still I cannot think he wrote in dudgeon. Now, if he were a Catholic, I would swear he was laughing as he wrote : if he is Anglican he may have worn an ascetic smile : but if Orthodox, as I suppose, his pen was dipped in gall. So doubtless he is a pig.

No one should be allowed in Holy Orders without a well developed sense of humour and a Consistory Court should hold annual session with powers illimitable as Star-Chamber to ensure it keeping up to scratch.

Yours unusually,

## LETTER XIX

London

*4th December, 1918.*

There is, I think, no word in the language employed so loosely as "kind," for it is used constantly with a significance it does not convey and but rarely in the sense it truly expresses. And curiously the word in general employment as its opposite has no relation to it—not even the negative one. Kindness is absorbed in love—is part of it, whereas unkindness is part of indifference. The abstraction it postulates is too invertebrate to be part of anything active. You see, then, there can be no possible point of contact between them, for—like love and indifference—they are on different planes, love being an active force and indifference a jelly-fish.

Friends and lovers are not "kind," for if their affection does not weigh more than that small part its sum is nothing.

Acquaintances and enemies are not "unkind," for if their indifference or antagonism amount to no more it is negligible.

In effect, then; kindness is a dole we accept from an acquaintance, unkindness a pain we suffer from a friend.

So, Redgie, please, when you write tell the Princess not to regard my respectful admiration as "kindness"; it is she who dispenses benignity in her gracious acceptance of my service.

She seems happy at the theatre, really interested in her part, anxious naturally, too good an artist to be over confident. It is not easy to strike the exact balance between confidence in technical ability and anxiety in regard to one's power to express every shade of the conception. Nerves play their part; they form the electric current

## LETTER NUMBER NINETEEN

which must be harnessed and used as an accessory ; if it take the lead its influence is fatal. She said she felt happy at rehearsal the other morning, but doubted her power to keep at the level then achieved. I told her that what you can do at rehearsal you can do before the Public, probably not the first night, certainly not every night. Who can, who is worth salt ?

The fact is Acting is not an intellectual accomplishment, it is instinctive ; instinct guided by intelligence. The only intellectual part of it is the technical, which must be forgotten in performance.

Did I tell you I had seen *The Purple Mask* ? I had read the original French play and therefore had a pretty good idea of what to expect, knowing how French plays are usually treated on the English Stage.

A manager, it would seem, chooses a French play for certain of its qualities and then proceeds to eliminate them—to alter, not only the spirit, but the actual construction incident and character, and then wonders why it does not produce the same effect. This we have seen over and over again, especially in the adaptation of farces, where, indeed, the root idea generally makes them unsuitable for English consumption, yet the adapter will flirt with it to an extent just sufficient to shock certain sensibilities while tantalisingly titillating others. Certain themes are best left alone ; emasculated they merely bore and translated they are impossible—in fact they won't translate. “ *Mon Dieu* ” does not mean “ My God ” ; often it means no more than the lift of an eyebrow, even “ Good gracious ! ” is too violent as an equivalent expletive. And so it is with many another expression which, literally rendered, shocks our more puritan senses. Rabelais in English is grossly



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offensive, in his own language his wit triumphs over his coarseness.

*Le Chevalier au Masque* was one of those post-Revolution episodes, somewhat akin to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, but far more ingenious in construction, treated with a light but very firm touch and requiring perfect Manner and balance in the acting. Matheson Lang (for whom it has been adapted as *The Purple Mask*) swamps it. He has elaborated his own part by sundry devices which do not add to the effect and strolls through situations which need tensity and alertness as though the whole thing bored him. But his worst offence is in cutting the last act entirely and giving us instead a new one which is commonplace in the extreme. In the original last act Napoleon appears and at once becomes the dominant figure. It was, perhaps, too much to expect an actor of Lang's popularity to tolerate such interference with his position as a Star; so in the English version Napoleon is eliminated; and with him goes all the freshness and originality of the *dénouement*.

What an inexhaustible mine of inspiration the arresting figure of the great Buonaparte. You can't have seen Réjane in *Madame Sans-Gêne*. You missed a great performance. It was my first experience of her and I never saw her to greater advantage. Irving produced a translation of the play for Ellen Terry, but, admirable as she was, she did not compare with the French woman.

Irving was too tall for Napoleon yet he contrived a wonderful impersonation. All the furniture was made higher, the door handles were raised and the lower panels exaggerated in order to dwarf his figure and he surrounded himself with all the tallest actors he could find. It was a *tour de force*, but not one to rank with his great performances.

## LETTER NUMBER NINETEEN

I was much disappointed with the Frenchman who played with Réjane ; Duquesne, I think his name was.

Murray Carson in *A Royal Divorce* was undoubtedly the best Napoleon I have seen, he gave us fine insight to the mentality of the man as well as a perfect picture. Hermann Vezin I also saw in the same play but he was not suited. A. E. George was unimpressive as the Little Corporal in a very weak drama founded on the delightful Brigadier Gerard stories. A fine play might have been written on that subject had an attempt been made to capture the atmosphere of the whole book instead of relying upon one not very interesting episode. Hare was disappointing as Napoleon in *The Great Conspiracy*, neither his appearance nor method lent itself to the impersonation.

It is strange that Dumas did not succeed in making a good play on the great man ; he spread his effort over too large a canvas, but there are fine scenes in his *Napoleon* which have been stolen with good effect by many writers, French and English.

Of the actors of the past generation Harry Jackson, that most excellent Comedian, was celebrated for his impersonation of Napoleon. Another was Gomersal, of whom a good story (one of many) is told. He was proprietor of the theatre at Worcester and an actor asking one night for free admission, the following conversation took place :

Gomersal : What line ?

Actor : Second Low Com.

Gomersal : " Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation ? "

Actor : " I tell thee she is, and therefore make her grave straight."

Gomersal : Pass One !

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

After lunch I go to Hampstead to see an author on a reconstruction I have recommended. The subject may interest you. I knew it was wrong dramatically but I could not see where it was wrong psychologically, for, depend upon it, if your play lacks dramatic *crescendo* you have not handled the psychology of your characters with true dramatic insight. The story concerns spiritualism and reincarnation and is treated with quite exceptional ability. The question is: whether a sudden revelation or dread of the intangible is the more demoralising influence? I think you must agree with me in deciding for the latter. Then, when revelation comes—when terror culminates in confirmation—the victim is driven to the decisive step that hastens the catastrophe. It seems so simple when the flaw is found and one wonders how it was possible to overlook it at the first. I have consequently recommended opening the play with Act III and putting Act I in its place. You'll say it is just like me to turn the thing topsy-turvey.

Perhaps you're right.



## LETTER XX

London

23rd December, 1918.

“ 1669, July 11th. To the King’s Playhouse, to see an old play acted of Shirley’s called *Hyde Park*, the first acted with horses ; an excellent epilogue spoken by Beck Marshall, the first female actress that appeared on the stage.”

Pepys from *Old Drury Lane*.

I had always thought of the respectable Miss Saunderson, who became the wife of the respected Betterton, the first “female actress.” I must enquire into the subject of Beck Marshall, but she is not my excuse for quoting the above.

“ The first acted with horses ! ”

Have you ever ridden a horse on the stage, Redgie ? Of course you haven’t, but warn Marie never to attempt it. Apart from the fact that—except perhaps at Drury Lane, Covent Garden or the Lyceum—a horse looks ridiculous, for it upsets all the perspective of the scenery, dwarfs everything and destroys its own effect by being too real, the poor beast suffers a martyrdom of nerves because of the hollowness it senses beneath its hoofs. Then a horse, you see, is a bad actor, he can play only one part ; himself—though to-day that is counted the highest art, so we may be prepared for a return to the Equestrian Drama.

I have had curious experiences in the saddle and even riding bare-back on the stage, for I have toured in two plays that necessitated the hire of a different horse each week and they ranged from the retired cab-horse to the high-stepping charger. Astride the former I have been jeered at by the Gallery ; and cheered for a daring I did not possess for keeping my seat on the latter, when two hundred supers, scene-shifters and company fled and the orchestra flung

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down their instruments and leaped into the Pit (it was a popular theatre without Stalls) after my mount had scared every soul off the stage, crashed through the scenery and finished with his near hind leg wedged in a star-trap.

The Gallery's joy was boundless ; the Pit's enthusiasm was tempered by anxiety as to whether I had horsemanship sufficient to dissuade the beast from treating the orchestra-well as the water-jump. The act-drop finally descended and the old-fashioned roller struck my shoulder as it fell—*though I did not!* A friend assured me after that had I known my danger I should have been scared out of my life. I take no credit for the exploit in which happy ignorance was my salvation.

On another occasion—I was riding bare-back this time—I found a buckler, and myself precariously near the flies and subsequently between the four hoofs of my rocking horse ; patient and docile, mercifully, when he had unloaded me. One regarded these cheery episodes as part of one's early training.

But to tell you of them was not my reason for the question, but because Christmas makes me think of Astley's, that dear old wonderful theatre that was in Westminster Bridge Road, and a visit to which was once among the proudest of my joys.

It was a huge place with a circus ring where usually are the Stalls and Pit, and the performance began with equestrian Turns. In the interval the apron of the stage was lowered into the ring and the entertainment continued behind the footlights, with horses, of course, taking part in the Pantomime or Play. The Pantomimes I can't recall, though I saw many ; my joy was in the dramas, especially *Mazeppa* and *Lady Godiva*.

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY

I don't remember Adah Isaacs Menken, the celebrated Mazeppa, though I heard of her from my father ; but I saw Maud Forrester in both these plays, a lady of ample proportions quite unlike the youthful Mazeppa, but, strapped to the back of the wild courser, thundering up a succession of raking-pieces, an inspiring spectacle to inflammable youth. I suspect that to-day she would scarcely satisfy as the modest Godiva, but I thought her very beautiful then—as doubtless she was.

There is a story told of a stage horse that was ridden by both Irving and Tree—But, no ; on second thoughts, I will not set it down, though I might not shame to tell it. One's tongue is less easily soiled than one's pen.

Why does the mention of Astley's recall the old Aquarium at Westminster ? Because both are gone, I suppose, and there is nothing to-day of either sort in the world of amusement.

I remember Zazel, the lady who, after doing her performance on the slack wire, was fired nightly from the mouth of a cannon. She was extraordinarily graceful and pretty and was a great attraction to what were known as the Crutch and Tooth-pick Brigade, precursors of the Monocled Mashers who to-day are succeeded by the Knuts. Farini, who introduced Zazel, was a great showman, and his *protégée* became the sensation of the London Season of 1877.

Blondin I never saw, but Ethardo, who ascended the Spiral balancing on a globe, I remember at the Aquarium, a dark bearded man wearing a blue and white leotard, his whole aspect and bearing giving a weight and impressiveness to what was really no more than the ordinary Act of the professional acrobat. But he knew the value of specialis-



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

ing ; like Harley Street, he realised that the fees increase in the same ratio as the proffered service is limited.

Ethardo was a link with Cremorne Gardens, where, as I heard in my youth, a man who tried the same feat on a bicycle and lost his life in the attempt, was hooted by the crowd.

I have distinct recollection of the adventurer, who, ascending from Cremorne attached to the car of a balloon, undertook to fly to earth. Mistaking his signal, his confederates in the car released him too soon, and the huge wings, upon which he was relying to float him to the ground with gentle revolutions, not being properly in motion, he toppled, headlong and hurtling—I saw him falling—and was impaled upon an ornamental spike, part of the decoration of a shop-front in the King's Road, Chelsea. His wings of oiled silk were shattered and I saw children in the street gathering the fragments as ghastly souvenirs.

At the Aquarium I first heard Jenny Hill, the Vital Spark. Well she deserved the *sobriquet*. Her rendering of her two famous songs *Good Boy 'Arry* and *Princess Yucalulaloo* was art of a very high order. She was indeed a dynamo, an electric personality, yet neither restless nor boisterous.

Concerts there were at the Aquarium where I heard many of the best singers ; in fact it combined, as a place of amusement, all the most entertaining qualities of the Coliseum with the freedom and spaciousness of the Earl's Court Exhibitions, which superseded it ; destined in their turn to be ousted from popular favour by the attractions of the White City.

We have had, occasionally, something of the atmosphere of the Aquarium at Olympia when it has been used for a Fair or Circus, but Olympia was never so cosy or so gay as

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY

the Aquarium at its best ; it is too vast, a perfect arena for displays, such as the Military Tournament, held in my young days at the Agricultural Hall.

The Aquarium would suit my mood to-night, to take my coffee and cigar there, listen to Jenny Hill, hear Macdermott sing *We don't want to fight, but, by Jingo, if we do !* split my sides over the gags and knockabout business of The Two Macs or the never-failing humour of Sweeney and Ryland and then watch black-bearded Farini—who might have been Du Maurier's model for Svengali—as with pompous and portentous preliminary he introduced the dazzling Zazel.

Ghosts, all of them !—dead as Marley.

Must I play Scrooge this Christmas, Scrooge before his regeneration ? No ; I envy no man his having ; solely I envy the gifts Fortune might have bestowed, but withholds, doubtless by reason of my undeserving.

Chris is in Yorkshire and I am alone.

Marie was with you yesterday, I expect ; her rehearsals suspended until Friday.

I am at a loose end.

“ The rain it raineth every day.”

Slippers and an armchair before the fire are not rest when the brain is *en garde*. I have not, like you, the great art of doing nothing gracefully.

Mrs. Silver is stoning raisins for a pudding ; but Christmas pudding is not amusing without the sauce of children's laughter ; yet, much as I love to see and hear them, children make me more self-conscious than the rising curtain on a first night.

I miss my Mother, Redgie ? Aren't I an old fool ? Poor Mother ! When I lost her ambition for me——Oh, she didn't

*LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR*

know, bless her ! I mean she was no sort of judge of Art, but she thought her goose a particularly fine swan and it did help.

I can't make up my mind whether to spend the evening reading Emerson or *Monte Cristo*.



## LETTER XXI

London

31st December, 1918.

“Joy gentle friend! Joy and fresh days of love

“Accompany your heart!”

Thanks, Redgie, many and sincere, for the Shakespeare Calendar. Each day as I tear off yesterday and discover some new and yet familiar gem of wisdom, wit, or keen analysis, I shall think of you and thank the good Dumas for guiding my steps toward such knowledge as I have of Sweet Will.

It is many years since I have been without my Shakespeare Calendar, but I am doubly glad to owe this year's to you, for it has been with you that I have discussed him more, and, in discussion, learned to know him better, than with any single soul I ever met. Some of his daily messages will seem most strangely inappropriate, yet I have known the day that brought weirdly unexpected fulfilment of the thing he seemed to prophesy; some will seem checks, corrections, warnings, reproofs and even castigations; and some will speak with a most strange directness, as from uncanny knowledge of my inmost self. But all is Truth, despite the efforts of those, who, by divorcing phrase or verse from its context, strive to warp his meaning.

And Shakespeare was an Actor!

To hell with the theories of Ignatius Donnelly and his cryptogram and all the Baconian crew and others who would rob our calling of its crowning glory: that an Actor did indeed give to humanity its greatest literary possession.

Let them disprove that claim before they dare to strip a single frond from the feather of his quill or a petal from the

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

laurel of his crown, ay—or a spark from the glory of his nimbus.

Listen while I read an old letter, written by one Peele to Marle, his friend :—

“ We were all verye merrye at the Globe, where Ned Alleyn did not seruple to affirme pleasantly to thy friend Will that he had stolen the speeches about the qualities of an Actor’s excellencye in *Hamlet* from conversations manyfold which had passed between them and opinions given by Alleyn touching the subject. Shakespeare did not take this tale in good sorte ; but Jonson put an end to the strife by wisely remarking : “ This needs no contention, Ned, you stole no doubt. Do not marvel, have you not seen him aete times out of number ? ”

Believe me, yours sincerely,

‘ G. Peele.’

I find here two points of enormous interest and though one may reflect upon a very human weakness in Will, the other does very positively support his claim, or rather that which his lovers make for him.

“ Shakespeare did not take this tale in good sorte.”

Pieture that scene at the Globe. Like Goldsmith, who preferred to write his replies to the satirical shafts of his friend, Doctor Johnson, Will did not find the apt retort to sprightly Ned’s friendly banter ready on his tongue ; not that he was affected, as was Goldsmith, with a stuttering utterance. His sense of humour, you see, was a little under the weather ; in such mood even the wittiest may fail of courage to press a friendly quarrel to the Seventh Cause of Touchstone. I love him all the better for his human weakness and I will not credit Ned with venomous intent in his “ pleasant affirmation ” of the alleged theft.

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-ONE

Then we have wise Ben Jonson rallying the pair. "If Will stole from Ned ;" he says in effect, "Ned also stole." And Will—? Like Molière—like every true artist-dramatist—*il prendrait ses biens où il les en trouve*—in Nature—in Truth.

But you will have noted that the alleged theft, as treated by both Ned and Ben, is but added confirmation, if such were needed, to the undisputed fact (accepted by those who knew him intimately) that Will *did indeed write the play* ; and therein lies my interest in the good Peele's letter.

Good health to you, my Redgie, and to your dear ones. I wish you heartily the love of friends and kindness (if you will have it) of acquaintances ; understanding and quick service ; the wit to make and the courage to grasp opportunity ; joy in achievement and freedom from petty worries. May all these serve to ease the path of 1919.

Yours paternally,



## LETTER XXII

London

14th January, 1919.

When I read that D'Artagnan had "an eye wide-open and intelligent" and "abnormal development of the maxillary muscles" I felt a certain vagueness—a sense that I was missing something. "Maxillary" is a worrying word; it is not certain whether it refers to the upper or lower jaw. Boy-like I had scamped the introductory passages, eager to get at the story, but as I thought over the whole on a second reading, I knew that I was losing enormously in what Stevenson calls—in regard to this very book—"the blackguardly travesty of translation." I determined to get the true colour from the original. I had little French and not much Latin, but the "not much" helped the "little" and by aid of the French-English of the good Smith it did not take so very long to master the first volume. By the time I had finished the eleventh; wept for the death of Porthos—as did Dumas himself, who relates how his grief drove him to strike work for the day and go to bed entirely overcome. His son, Alexandre, visiting him and much concerned, enquiring the cause; "I have killed Porthos," said Dumas, weeping copiously—grieved for the subsidence of the noble Athos and spent a sigh for Aramis—though I could not endorse D'Artagnan's dying lament: "*Athos, Porthos, au revoir, Aramis à jamais adieu!*"—and had bidden a last farewell to the valiant Gascon himself, I found myself fairly competent to tackle any of my author's works and proceeded to devour them voraciously.

I could spend hours discussing the great Trilogy,\* which I don't doubt you know even better than I, and of course,

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\* *Les Trois Mousquetaires, Vingt Ans après, le Vicomte de Bragelonne.*

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-TWO

you know Stevenson's appreciation : " What novel has such epic variety and nobility of incident—good sense, gaiety and wit—unflagged literary skill, or more wholesome morality ? "

It would be sheer joy to me to talk of the love story of Diane de Monsoreau and the brave de Bussy—of the exploits of Henri de Navarre—of Pedro the Cruel—of the Chevalier D'Harmental—of the Companions of Jéhu—of Sylvandire—of Fabien and Louis dei Franchi, the Chevalier de Maison-Rouge, Ange Pitou and Cagliostro—of Henri de Guise, Catharine de Médicis, la Mole and Coconnas, Nanon, Canolles, Madame de Cambes, Diane de Poitiers and Benvenuto Cellini—of the relentless Edmond Dantés, the glorious Chicot and the superb Gorenflot ; but all this would not be to answer your question : how it happened that " the Ventripotent Mulatto " taught me to love Shakespeare.

At school I had watched my elders play *Henry IV, Part I*, *Henry V.* and *Macbeth*, and in all the leading parts my favourite master, he of the rusty thread-bare gown and battered mortar-board ; I think he was as poor as I know he was good and as wise as kindly. I recall the day when I stood before him, struggling with the Rule of Three, and he discovered on the reverse of my slate the legend " Down with the Liberals ! " and without a word took it to the other end of the great class-room, where the ferocious and red-bearded Walker was instructing the Fourth in Algebra. As Edmonds held it out to him, pointing at me, Walker spluttered and his watery blue eye lit balefully upon me. I don't think he ever forgave me ; but Edmonds and I were friends from that moment. A grave ox-eyed man, with a rare smile which on occasions shone through his shabbiness like a May morn-

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ing in the Caledonian Road. The boys adored him but whispered at his approach, the tragedy they sensed about him awed them, but the honesty in his eyes reassured.

But my point—Of course ; Edmonds played Falstaff, I remember it well and how I loved it—Henry V. in which he did not convince me (How was it possible ? Those eyes ! That beard !) and Macbeth. I have lost the impression of the last but he could not have been right. I remember better the farces and burlesques that completed the programmes. Edmonds was a comedian—or might have been but for the mortar-board. The day came when I was cast for some small part in *The Merchant of Venice*, I forget which ; Balthazar I expect, or Salarino ; but no matter. All this had not taught me to love Shakespeare, but merely given me the desire to act—something—anything with passion or emotion in it.

The time came when I was working in that city office and although I lodged in Bloomsbury, I used to wander home always by Fleet Street and the Strand, and above all I loved the old book and print shops in Holywell Street. It was there I bought for a few pence my second-hand copies of Dumas.

It was his wonderful essay on *Othello* that first taught me the truth ; I have read it——Oh, how many times.

Dumas had seen Kemble, Kean and Macready as the Moor, as well as Talma and Joanny. He describes their different methods, but he describes best the marvel of Shakespeare's genius.

He tells, unknowingly, how Burbage must have played the part.

Burbage ! What that name has come to mean to me !



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-TWO

Burbage and Mélingue ! The two greatest actors, I think, that ever lived.

The Englishman, wide-eyed (like D'Artagnan) leonine ; as we are told, " beauty to the eye and music to the ear ; " inspired by the genius who was his comrade and who drew for him the greatest psychological conceptions that ever sprung from human consciousness " full arméd like Athene from the brain of Jove."

The Norman, full chested and deep-throated ; very tall, long-legged, " like a human pair of compasses," yet finely proportioned.

The first a woodsman, alert yet dreamy, with the music of Arden in his soul : the other, the perfect artist-actor (trained by Lemaître and fellow pupil with Charles Fechter whom he outshone in the theatre though not, perhaps, in the social way) sculptor—when playing the part of Benvenuto Cellini, he modelled a statue in clay before the audience at every performance—and painter ; having walked from Rouen to Paris in the snow, he fashioned his costumes for Buridan in canvas and painted them himself so that they passed for the richest court attire. In those days the actors found their own wardrobe—as opera stars did in my early days and may do now for ought I know.

But Shakespeare !

Dumas told me of his first visit to London—of his watching the players in the yard of the Red Bull Tavern—of his engagement in old Burbage's Company. I didn't know then that the detail was from my author's imagination, I accepted it as historical, and it led me to seek more. He had taught me to read *Othello* and so doing taught me to know the other master-pieces and to love him who had given them to me.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

It was very good to see you though only for that flying visit, and your Mother's pride in Marie's success was refreshing as ingenuous.

I must see the play again. I think it will bear it for its own sake ; I know it will for the acting. Marie will gain that light touch she needs in Act II ; the boy who plays the scene with her was sick with nerves on the first night ; he had a bad time in the War and is not even yet quite himself ; he communicated his mental state and hampered her.

She could not improve on her last act. In the first the attack was uncertain on the opening night, that will come right with repetition. But I have told you all this.

And now I have a small piece of personal news. Forgive the vanity that makes me save it for the last. I have actually got work. Amazing, isn't it ?

Quite an agreeable part—

Detestable word ?

Yes, I know, in such connection, but I can't say better for it. It's easy as pie—at least it should be. Nothing really to act at all. You do it on technique. If the author has drawn the character truly and your personality seems to fit you are good—if there are flaws in the characterisation, if your face is too round or too long or your tailor has not cut the waistcoat in the correct ratio to the waist-line, it may be said that you are “unconvincing” or “unhappily cast.” Walkley will fire off a line of Virgil ; Baughan comment with deprecating gravity ; Littlewood will be patronising, Morrison sorrowful, Fargeon mordant, Haddon sarcastic, and Carroll insolent.

Well, we'll hope for the best—I'm sure you do. Chris will be hilarious—I extremely nervous, and the artists

*LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-TWO*

disengaged in Thursday's *Telegraph* envious or congratulatory according to their varying temperaments.

I humbly await your note of congratulation.

Yours deferentially,

P.S.—You read, of course, how Cork celebrated the Sinn Fein victory by dynamiting the memorial to their dead in the South African War.

How beautifully Irish !



## LETTER XXIII

London

30th January, 1919.

Don't mistake ; I like to hear the commonplace things, for your comments upon them are never commonplace. We all make the mistake of thinking it possible for another to hold exactly the same point of view on some one subject, but it just isn't so and you've got to respect them very thoroughly before you can tolerate their diametrically-opposed-to-yours view. But if you can discussion is stimulating.

We could squabble horribly over *General Post*, but I am not going to. I will admit this much : that had it been written with more refinement of feeling by one who sensed the innate qualities of gentility, I might have enjoyed its satire. It is easy enough to set up any old Aunt Sally, call it the type of a class, and knock it over to an accompaniment of jeers from another class. The characters in this play pretend to be types and they just aren't. The thesis is a gross lie, a pandering to the vanity of Socialism. The girl is a little cad without heart or decency. But there, I loathe the thing so that I cannot even be fair to a certain crude cleverness that it undoubtedly has. I couldn't even be properly fair to the acting. Madge Titheradge did not soften for me the girl's objectionable qualities.

A nature is so—or so, fundamentally. Women have ways of hiding certain sides of themselves for years and years ; then suddenly surprising those who think they know them by some utterly inconsistent attitude. “To have seen, to have heard and to have experienced ” does not change a nature, though it may bring out more markedly certain characteristics, as all exercise does—as physical exercise develops muscles. You say it is easy to judge,

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but is it? To condemn or to approve illogically. Yes. But to *judge* implies the exercise of wisdom and knowledge and the resultant Justice is a thing by no means easy in regard to any human affair.

Your problem is no problem. "The lie," you say, "hurt no one;" therefore it is no sin. But is such a lie possible? I fear not; for a lie is pretty sure to injure its author, if only in his self-esteem; that's why it's such a dirty weapon. If it leave no soil on the conscience of its author I feel sure it is innocuous. Whereas the truth is often a brutal bludgeon. Yes, and the consciousness of having used it cannot always be a salve to its retailer, who must know that he has hurt more surely than with the harmless lie. Some who pass for *good* are terrifically narrow. But Life isn't; it's just what we make it, narrow for those who think narrowly, but splendidly spacious for the broad-minded, the generous and the brave.

Never believe your friend knows more than you, though she has read much and retained it, she doesn't *know*, as you do, instinctively. What is the use of such? you ask. Well, I take it, she is kindly if misguided: and among her sort and the less informed no doubt she has wiped away many tears—given the sympathy they understood, of a kind too narrow, perhaps, to fill your need, but amply appreciated where it was spent.

It is not necessary to know the Why of everything: some things *are*; their truth leaps at us, it is unanswerable.

You are not abstruse, for you express profound thoughts in clear images; I wish I had the same clarity. I fail altogether at times to give you my thought with which I know you would agree if I were as crystalline as you.

Many like the lady you refer to have not exactly good

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but neutral intentions ; they are colourless or else chameleons just borrowing colour. I don't say don't take them seriously but don't take them to heart. Don't be impatient with them, it can only recoil on yourself. They are imbecile, self-satisfied, irritating to a degree ; they must be lead, you can't drive them for they have the stubbornness of mules—conscious virtue breeds that. But, trying as they are, remember you are learning in all your dealings with them ; they are perpetual and shining examples of what to avoid.

I told you when we met of my mistake about Chris' admirer, who is not an actor but a young lieutenant. She has now written to ask if she may be engaged to him. To oppose would be indiscretion of the most indiscreet. Half the love romances of the world are fed and thrive on opposition.

“The course of true love never did run smooth.”

Quite so. But the course that is smoothed is often the severest test of the love. So the young gentleman shall be “sweetly oiled with praise” until the qualities of his truth shall declare themselves. To Chris I said, in effect : By all means be engaged if you wish, all I want is your happiness ; but do try to be sure you have a friend as well as a lover. Love's Young Dream is beautiful, but it doesn't—can't—fill life. There must be work as well. If you leave the Stage be sure you find congenial employment that he can take an interest in. If he leaves the Army be sure you can take intelligent and sympathetic interest in his work. Don't dismiss Politics and Religion and say they won't come into your lives, because you'll both read the newspapers before you're forty and there find perpetual food for controversy. Politics include domestic economy and enter into every business. You must take intelligent interest in them or you'll be unhappy and agree about them



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-THREE

or be sufficiently good friends to disagree without rancour. And Religion includes your beliefs and your faith, without which life is rudderless. Learn to know each other so well that each may respect the other's judgment even in differing from it.

I now await developments.

You refer to the depression that seems to have descended upon us all and wonder as to its cause.

My diagnosis is simple : a virulent attack of Wilson.

That monumental crank butted in and prevented the War coming to a definite conclusion.

Wilson is the Saviour of Germany, which in time will rear its head again, like the poisonous rattlesnake it is and strangle Civilisation.

Everyone is depressed because the War never *ended*, it merely *stopped*.

There was no victory—no defeat, and, as a consequence, there can be no punishment. The criminal was never arrested ; he goes free. How, then, can he be brought to judgment ?

It becomes a question of bargaining—of relying on the faith—the word of the age-long liar.

We have foregone coercion, so there can be no reparation.

Wilson saved precious lives by stopping the War.

Granted !

But millions had already been wasted and it was false policy to relinquish Victory and Settlement for the sake of the comparatively few more that might have been sacrificed. Decision was all-important.

Heartless !

No doubt ; but when Policy dictates, Humanity has no part.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Wilson's Fourteen Points are directed solely against us that the German-Irish element that dominates the U.S.A. in relation to us may dance at the downfall of an Institution it loathes, its Friend and Benefactor, the British Empire.

The League of Nations, if ever it materialises, will become a sort of official debating society ; its conclusions may be illuminative but no single Nation will consent to be bound by them to the detriment of its prestige.

And our Government ?

Intimidated by Democracy, or rather the Bolshevist spirit, fostered in Germany for the submerging of Russia that comes to us *via* Ireland and aims at nothing less than the downfall of England by the demoralisation of the ignorant, and worse than ignorant, the half-educated. This spirit a firm government would have crushed in its inception had it placed the United Kingdom under Martial Law in 1914, as it should and might easily have done. We should have grumbled but submitted had the extent of the peril been proclaimed.

Disraeli would have done it, or Palmerston ; but they were Statesmen, not pettifogging lawyer politicians and opportunists.

There is no wonder people are depressed. It will take years to out-grow it.

Yours,

## LETTER XXIV

London

12th February, 1919.

Fundamentals ! I am not going to argue or explain, it would take too long and then not be convincing. If my ideas are so ill-expressed that they do not reach your understanding it is my fault and I should have more to do than start again at the beginning. I should have to answer side issues of thought that I cannot even conjecture, but listen : If I am an apple-tree left to grow untended I may develop all askew and yield unwholesome sour apples. If I am pruned and tended I may grow straight ; and if I am fussed over and have a piece of sweet pear grafted on to me I may become a pleasant sight and yield most luscious fruit—but all the time and in each case I am fundamentally an apple-tree and nothing can make me other. How far it may be in our power to make ourselves agreeable or disagreeable apple-trees without outside influence or care I don't pretend to know. I guess a strong-willed apple-tree might insist on growing up straight and reaching to the sun though his lot had provided that his first shoot should appear in a shaded corner of the orchard. But I feel sure no crab-apple can, unaided, produce New Town pippins.

It is true, also, for I have seen it, that a woman can and has hidden, deliberately, a certain side of her nature for years ! and then suddenly sprung it on the world. You say she might not have known the quality was there, but you are wrong, for one may look back and see that certain indications that were puzzles, *culs de sac*, now show in the light of this exposure as parts of her fundamental self. No one gambles solely owing to the influence of another,



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or drugs, or indulges any vice you care to name. The seed was there.

I suppose a certain amount of discussion stimulates the intelligence. I prefer to agree with you—as I know I do *fundamentally*!

You ask me to tell you more about my ideas of the close association of Shakespeare and Burbage and my reason for assuming the latter to have been our greatest actor.

I leave Mélingue for the present, the other subject is so large.

First, then, I must ask you to accept the premise I postulated in discussing Garrick; namely, that the greatest art must have for its exposition the greatest medium. It is an axiom with me that the great characters of Shakespeare are the greatest media. Accept this and I will endeavour to expound.

Will Shakespeare and Dick Burbage were of an age, there was only a year between them; both were members of Burbage Senior's Company. Dick became the leading man; Will, rising from mere General Utility, became the hack playwright. Like many another dramatist since, he joined the Company to learn the rudiments of the technique. Pinero and Carton were both actors; Ibsen a stage-manager; most of the best dramatists have had practical experience on the stage. It is generally allowed that Will and Dick were friends. I imagine the closest tie between them, the tie of a unique aim of artistic expression, free from any taint of jealousy; for, I take it, Dick had no ambition to write nor Will much to act. We hear of him playing the Ghost of Hamlet's father and Old Adam and we may imagine him in sundry other parts, such as Banquo (model of *raisonneurs*) the gracious and philosophical Duke, banished

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR

to Arden, the old courtier-warrior Bellarius and others that require no special gifts beyond dignity and grace of bearing, a resonant voice and perfect elocution, which we may well concede to him. I like to think of him as just the simple actor—groping, observing, listening, during those early days—"talking Theatre," as actors do who love it, with Dick on every possible opportunity.

Eventually Dick persuades his father to let Will tinker some of the old plays of the repertoire, for he has perceived how that wondrous imagination may revivify the worn-out dramas, inspire their fustian and give them new heart. No doubt he tried his hand on dozens during his apprenticeship and old Burbage cut his work as Irving cut Wills'—I mean W. G. Wills, who wrote *Charles the First*, *Eugene Aram*, *Faust*, and other plays for the Lyceum.

Picture rehearsals during the stock season.

Shakespeare writing, perhaps at the prompt table, a new speech for Dick—some lines for Condell, Henslowe or Nat Field, a comic scene for Somers or Tarleton or remoulding the leading lady's part for Ned Alleyn. Then making notes on his tablets as he took his cup of sack at the tavern in the interval, and burning mid-night oil, with Holinshed, Boccaccio, Plutarch and studying to-morrow's part. It is so feasible—so probable, I am certain it is fact.

Years pass and experience is won.

From the old manuscript of *The Murderous Life and Terrible Death of the Rich Jew of Malta* he has fashioned *The Merchant of Venice*: from *The Revenge of Hamblett*, *Prince of Denmark*, the great tragedy as we know it; which alone would have established his fame. Upon one of Cinthio's tales he has built the greatest of all domestic dramas, *Othello*.

And Burbage?

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He is now the leading man and has acted them all. It is said of him that he was “equally delightful as the youthful Pericles and aged Lear.” He was the original impersonator of Hamlet, Lear, Pericles, Brutus, Macbeth, Shylock, Richard, Romeo, Coriolanus and Othello. And he acted them all *under Shakespeare’s direction!*

Without doubt the author’s full intent was expressed; no discussions about meanings or readings; the author was present to explain and direct all, he, who had known from their first inception who would portray his characters, and doubtless moulded them with full apprehension of his protagonist’s powers—and of his limitations, if he had any; though to have fitted equally as Hamlet, Richard, Othello, Lear, Macbeth and Shylock would seem to imply that his range was boundless.

His greatest triumph would seem to have been as Othello, and if he did indeed illustrate all the possibilities in his impersonation of “the grievéd Moor,” as is reported, he was undoubtedly the Actor-Genius.

I accept him as such; I find it impossible not to do so.

Would Shakespeare have continued to entrust him with such overwhelming opportunities had he misused them?

It is incredible.

Shakespeare found in his friend so perfect a medium that it stimulated him to his highest and noblest flights; genius reacted upon genius—each was urged to the uttermost of the possible. Together they did more than revolutionise the Theatre, they *created* it, building upon the fumbling attempts of their predecessors.

In place of the recital of “fustian” by “robustious periwig-pated fellows” were given expositions of Truth—of living Reality. In place of platitudes in stilted periods



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-FOUR

—Wisdom, Philosophy, Beauty were crystallised in burning phrases; and we may be sure that the method of their delivery was revolutionised by the actor, for each artist drew inspiration from the other: their gifts were complementary.

Shylock, Richard, Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Macbeth were personated, be well assured, with as much individuality as differentiates their persons—they were in fact *acted*.

Imagine the perfect Othello if you can! Be sure you will never see him in the flesh.

Salvini is said to have been great. I remember my old friend Miss Philp, of whom I have told you, said: “I would rather never have lived than have died without seeing Salvini!” and she was no mean judge. It was not quite Shakespeare’s Othello, but let us allow it was great. But observe; in other *rôles* Salvini was still Salvini. His physique and temperament fitted peculiarly the character of Othello: he exploited them.

But Burbage was also perfectly the “red-haired Jew!”

Who else has succeeded equally in both these *rôles*?

Kean?

We will talk later of Kean’s Shylock and Othello, but it is notorious that he failed as Hamlet.

Irving?

As Shylock; yes; though, for me, he did not touch his greatest in the part—as Hamlet; unquestionably. But as Othello?

There is much to be said of Irving’s Othello. I reserve it. I have told you how I was disappointed in his Lear.

But Lear is specifically mentioned as one of Burbage’s greatest triumphs.

Devrient, the German, would seem to have been the

## *LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR*

greatest of comparatively modern Lears. Let us suppose him as great as has been reported.

What of his Macbeth ?

Here most of the great ones have failed. I do not know of one who excelled in the part ; and no part admits of such a variety of conceptions.

Yet, Burbage, with the author's guidance, certainly made no mistake.

Is it not logical to assume that he excelled in all ? I think so.

I assume it and I think you must allow that the hypothesis is soundly based.

## LETTER XXV

London

16th February, 1919.

The Theatre was made for the Actor not the Actor for the Theatre.

There is no doubt whatever about this—no possibility of doubt.

The human element always predominates. It always has and will everlastingly. It was proved in the War—has been proved in every war and in every form of natural contention.

The *décor*, which includes every element of the setting, colour scheme, lighting, grouping of supernumeraries, is merely adjunctive to the Actor.

The Poet has inspiration—Well ! The mere recital of his verse will stir the imagination—Well again ! But the mere machine-like recital of inspired verse in an expressionist *décor* does not make a theatre. It may make a puppet-show, but the Theatre implies *acting*, and the very moment we have acting, poet and *décor* disappear—are absorbed into, and thereafter are expressed solely by the Actor. From him, thereafter, the witnesses take their impression and to him the bulk of them will give their credit or their blame.

You have heard me say again and again that a certain part “carried” the actor. His exposition was indifferent ; he brought no special gift to the interpretation, beyond his bare technical accomplishment—without which he cannot be called actor—even bad actor—and, unknowingly or at least (in his badness) unimaginatively, the exercise of that intelligent faculty conveyed enough of the poet’s intention to convince the mass, but *it was coloured by his individuality*—the human element, from which it seemed to spring ; and, bad though he may have been, the actor dominated.



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Shakespeare knew this.

It was for this reason that he took pains to create a series of psychological studies unequalled as vehicles for the exploitation of the Actor's Art.

Shakespeare has himself defined the Art of the Actor in those admirable tenets laid down by Hamlet in his Advice to the Players.

"To suit the action to the word, the word to the action."

By action Shakespeare did not mean merely physical gesture, but included intellectual revelation.

Intellectual revelation implies expression of the soul of the dramatist's creation; physical gesture includes an appearance, deportment and diction consonant with such creation. He who combines these attributes in just proportion has attained the perfection of technical skill; given these qualities, it would seem to me that we have the full equipment of the dramatic artist. Such artist having for his material the work of genius, must inevitably reveal genius in himself.

Shakespeare therefore took infinite pains so to create and portray his characters that, much as they might suffer from inadequate representation at the hands of the ill-graced artist, they should afford the fullest scope for the genius-interpreter.

I know my attitude would shock many who regard Shakespeare with such awe—such reverence for his inspired gifts as the unique poet—that they would consider it profanity thus to approach the Man. They believe, even, that they know more about his work and the way it should be interpreted than those who recognise in him the supreme Man of the Theatre. They will tell you that his thought was not for the Actor at all; nor even of the

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

just psychological development of his characters, but worship him as an inspired machine for the grinding out of verse.

They ignore the fact that verse was merely the medium for his expression of a superb theatrical technique.

I understand this lack of sympathy for the Theatre: and, as his genius places him upon an unapproachable pinnacle as poet, I recognise the excuse for the attitude. But Shakespeare's extraordinary technical skill cannot be an accident. He had trained in the theatre to acquire it and I maintain that, if accident there was, it was in his God-given gift of poesy; for his human conscious labour lay in the struggle to achieve perfection in his *métier*. He was primarily the playwright and his crowning triumph lay in the fact that he became the First and Greatest of all Playwrights.

He is the First and the Greatest because he is always true; his instinct is unerring; his logic of mentality irrefutable.

The proof of this is that if an actor is puzzled as to the precise meaning of a passage he has only to memorise and speak the words with conviction (knowing that they *must* be the *right* words) and inevitably their full sense will break on him. He will feel them his own—the best possible to express the thought, and the thought will be the inevitable thought sequent to the subject. The transcendent genius of Shakespeare will breathe spirit into his understanding.

I am not going to tell you how Shakespeare did for the English language what Dante did for the Italian; my concern is what he did for the Stage. He not only created the greatest vehicles for Acting and instructed us how to use them but he standardised the Art.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

The roll of English dramatists contains many illustrious names but I can think of no great actor who has not set the seal upon his greatness by his interpretation of some character of Shakespeare.

He is so great that his name alone is the touchstone of greatness.

Why is this ?

Because others, while striving to afford acting opportunity—and often failing—generally thought first of their beautiful words.

Shakespeare never did this. Action ! Action all the time ! A flow of rhetoric, yes ; thought, profound, analytic, philosophic ; wit, humorous, caustic or satirical ; fantasy, poetry, imagery, perpetually ; but *always* as a vehicle for the exposition of character. It is never the poet's voice, always the voice of his creation revealing its soul.

How often do we hear : "Shakespeare says——"

(For example) ". . . . that which we call a rose,

"By any other name would smell as sweet ;"

He didn't. Juliet said it.

"If music be the food of love, play on."

Shakespeare ? No ; Orsino.

We are at liberty to guess Shakespeare's sentiments on these subjects, and it pleases us to feel that they coincide with his characters', because love of roses and music seem to us our English poet's inevitable qualities.

"This precious stone set in the silver sea."

Shakespeare's patriotism ? No ; John of Gaunt's.

"I charge thee fling away ambition."

Wolsey's bitterness.

"Ambition should be made of sterner stuff."

Marc Antony's irony.



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

*Did Shakespeare hate ambition ?*

You will find no passage where a character of his approves it as a quality.

I suspect, as I once told you, that in Elizabethan times ambition was considered only as an attribute of tyranny—that the word was not in use as qualifying honest endeavour.

The old actors used to carry on conversation solely by quotations from the plays—and not so very long ago I have heard them.

I seem to wander ; but it is in my effort to convince you of the perfection of Shakespeare's work as the actor's vehicle.

And now consider this—a thing which we have all come to regard as commonplace, yet truly a marvel that should fill us with continual amazement—he created a whole gallery of sweet and pure girls and young wives who are yet *great acting parts* !

This would not strike the lay mind as remarkable because it does not know or else forgets two facts ; first, that women never appeared upon the stage until Shakespeare had been dead forty-four years and that consequently these creations were purely idealistic : and second, that no one had ever done it before.

Read the works of the other dramatists and see for yourself. If their women are good they are colourless. Sweet Seventeen has no character in their hands ; she simpers, she pouts, she wails or she moans, she loves without soul or depth of feeling, she even commits suicide in unconvincing despair, but the best she reveals of herself is an insipid prettiness.

Compare Miranda, Ophelia, Cordelia, Desdemona, Imogen.

I don't name Beatrice, Rosalind, Viola or Portia because, being comedians, they may be said to be what actors call

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Character parts ; far more easy to write—and to act—than straight parts.

Imagine Miranda attempted by Massinger, Ben Jónson, Webster, Ford or Beaumont and Fletcher !

Extend the range of comparison ; reinforce the Elizabethans with the stalwarts of the French Theatre, include Corneille, Racine, Molière, Voltaire.

Can you find anywhere the dainty grace, simplicity, good sense and true womanliness of the girl-woman, Miranda ?

Extend it still further ; admit Schiller and Goethe.

Gretchen !

I believe she stands out as the solitary achievement of sweetness and purity allied to definite character among them all.

Gretchen apart, not only had no predecessor nor contemporary of Shakespeare succeeded in creating a type of the simple maid, human and palpitating, who was yet a *good acting part*—BUT NO ONE HAS DONE IT SINCE !

Tragedy Queens by the score, talking like men, gesticulating, fulminating, agonizing, vociferating *tirade on tirade* !

But compare Bérenice, Camille, Emilie, Hermoine (*Andromaque*), Sémiramis, Phèdre with Cleopatra, Queen Katharine, Volumnia, Cymbeline's Queen, Queen Margaret, Lady Macbeth.

Even on this ground Shakespeare beats them all.

Faithfully to reproduce humanity or credibly to create it is not necessarily to provide acting opportunity. This has been abundantly proved ! Perfectly consistent human characters may talk brilliantly and expose their inmost souls, but if their story be not unfolded in action the result cannot be called Drama ( $\delta\rho\acute{\alpha}\nu$ —to do, to act).

Shakespeare knew this and kept it ever in mind.

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

Thus the Play Scene is not inevitable to the unfolding. Hamlet does not move against the King—in spite of his protest that he will “take the Ghost’s word for a thousand pound,” and although he most clearly “catches the conscience of the King” in his “mouse-trap”—until he has seen the wicked Claudius murder his Mother. It occurs merely to provide acting opportunity, which it most effectively does.

It is Siward’s army and his own fatalism, not Banquo’s Spirit, that over-throws Macbeth. Yet the apparition of Banquo furnishes Macbeth with one of his greatest moments : that is why it is there.

Lady Macbeth’s nightmare does not advance the argument one whit : had she “died hereafter” it would not have affected the catastrophe. The scene was inserted merely to afford opportunity for an actor’s *tour de force*.

Claudio’s brutal and flagrantly caddish designation of Hero as a “rotten orange” on the steps of the altar and the whole of Don John’s artificial imbroglio are pure “melodramatics” according to the definition, and in no wise concern the love affairs of Benedick and Beatrice ; yet they are full of acting chances and lead to the lovers’ most effective scene. *Voilà la raison d’être*.

The exposure of Parolles has no bearing upon the main issue of Helena’s pursuit of Bertram ; yet what fat for the comedian !

And it was not merely in the manufacture of scenes, but by the introduction of set speeches that Shakespeare designed opportunity for the display of his actor’s skill.

I picture Dick Burbage linking his arm in Will’s, as they left rehearsal for the luncheon interval and adjourned to the neighbouring hostelry for a cup of canary, and insidiously suggesting : “Look here, Will, Lady Mac. had a glorious



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

ramp about the raven in the Castle scene, can't you keep her out of the Court-yard for a bit and give me a chance? Macbeth is always seeing witches and things; suppose I see a bloody dagger floating in the air. You could write me a gorgeous bit on that." And Will, while the drawer refills the cups, jotting down on his tablets:—"Is this a dagger that I see before me?" and a few notes to be elaborated later into the magnificent rhetorical flood by which, no doubt, Burbage stirred to its highest pitch the enthusiasm of the patrons of the Globe.

Similar ebullitions occur in many of the plays; for example, that speech which is the exasperation of the producer:—"Once more unto the breach, dear friends!" When presumably the whole action of the play stops while Henry exhorts his troops.

Again; the cynic Jaques' review of the Seven Cycles of Man's existence.

The much-quoted Mercy speech, with which Portia holds up the process of Antonio's trial.

Juliet's self-hypnotism to the point of tragic horror before she swallows the Friar's narcotic.

And the bare-faced interpolation of that exquisite phantasy imagined by the stalwart Mercutio (beau-ideal of mediæval swashbucklers) describing the whirling course of the fairy midwife's intrepid *cortège* athwart the senses of slumbrous humanity.

I maintain that all these scenes and episodes, which are in no case inevitable to the construction, were invented simply and solely for the purpose of affording vehicles for the actor; and they are, in fact, identical in substance if not in form with the opportunities occurring in the type of play which our critics deride as Melodrama.

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-FIVE

The truth is that Shakespeare was King of Melodramatists.

The reason he transcends all other melodramatists being that he was incapable of psychological misstatement.

Even the unnecessary assassination of Emilia is justified by the illogical cruelty of Iago's jealousy in the moment of his "foredoing"—Iago, the monumental self-lover, who was always stung to the depths of his wickedness in witnessing even the smallest measure of prosperity or joy in another.

Coleridge tells us that whenever he believed he had found a psychological flaw in Shakespeare, though he hugged the discovery for years, he was always forced to admit in the end that Shakespeare was right. This is where the lesser dramatists fail.

But who is greater than very much less when measured against his stupendous Genius? Set the whole sum of dramatic and poetic achievement in the balance and *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, or *Othello* in the other scale and their work shall kick the beam.

As my dear old Dumas wrote of him ; "*le poète qui a le plus créé après Dieu !*"

## LETTER XXVI

London

1st March, 1919.

Hamlet says : " I did love you once."

But did he ? He may have thought he did, but in any case something else has swamped his life and Ophelia is forgotten—which is proof that he did not ! He could never have loved her. How could that frail simple creature have satisfied or been in any sense complementary to his nature ? The Hamlet nature has no room for love. Introspection rules out that emotion which feeds on sacrifice, given and accepted without thought of self or gain.

Romeo thought he loved Rosaline; a mawkish sentimentality. Then he met Juliet and he knew Truth. His whole nature changed—or rather, different aspects of it gained ascendancy. He became manly—he suffered ; there is no love without.

We speak disparagingly of the love of Romeo and Juliet, missing what is so clearly there. We scoff at love at first sight, and rightly as a rule. It is only in rare instances that intuition flashes the truth into the souls of each in that first meeting : generally, in such cases, it is a purely physical attraction that has no spark of spirit in it. But to those two there was instantaneous revelation, they never doubted and they were right.

My Chris was doped. David was amusing himself—perhaps realised she felt deeper than he thought possible, or ever intended—floundered—grew ashamed and lied. I am not excusing him. I am just trying to understand.

Chris was dazzled ; suspected no shallows and dashed into the flood without thought.

He deserves to be hurt, but not shot. She deserves something—less than she's got, poor child.



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-SIX

A woman mustn't believe all a man says when he's making love to her—and generally doesn't unless she knows his nature well enough to have a reasonable faith that it comes from the depths. Men always say the same commonplaces. You may read them in books, or in the letters that get published in Divorce and Breach of Promise cases.

This sounds brutal doesn't it ?

I wish it were not true.

Chris—or any of five hundred other girls—listens to David—or Tom or Dick or Harry—and without troubling to *know* anything about his character, puts all her faith in his silly words—and they all use the same words !

Are the foolish males to be shot and the silly females compensated ?

It is a large question—too large for me.

But I feel there is an answer other than the claim of the advanced latch-key girl for an equality that is merely the excuse for license. For, depend upon it, sensuality in some form is at the root of all the trouble or what is called the Woman Question.

Those who feel deeply suffer more acutely than the cooler tempered, but the great law that governs the universe, the Law of Compensation, restores the balance by giving them more exquisite joy in attainment.

And who shall affirm that the cold-blooded are necessarily better balanced than those who feel ?

What says Hamlet ? :—

“ . . . . . bless'd are those,

“ Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,

“ That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger

“ To sound what stop she please ; ”

Obviously. The temperate are most bless'd—negatively,

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

for they miss the heights as well as avoid the depths. I had rather be the Dane than the "antique Roman."

If impulse prompts the wildest act which yet achieves success and injures none who shall dare brand the actor as unbalanced?

Human judgment is nearly always unjust, but we must have laws, I grant. Yet our laws are based, in the main, on the law of averages, which is Chance. I once lost nineteen times running at baccarat—it cost me nine pounds in ha'pence. Most laws are like that. They are right—or wrong—for nineteen cases and the reverse for the twentieth. Lucky if you have capital to win on the twentieth chance, be your fund-Pluck or Endurance.

The only immutable law is the Law of Compensation, but we need the record of all time past and eternity to work out its principle.

There is no perfectly just human law.

The Law of Compensation is another name for God.

So, then, while we are here each of us were best to be a law to himself, and in himself he will find direction. Follow it and he can't go wrong. Also—defy it and he may go right by accident.

But is it right to go right by *accident*?

Is it not, only in degree, less wicked than to go wrong deliberately?

Are there degrees of Right?

There are certainly degrees of Wrong, but surely Right is absolute.

Is any Right that gives pain all right?

Or any Wrong that gives joy all wrong?

All time past and eternity alone can answer.

Madness! Ay, but there's "method in't."

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-SIX

You have called me mad.

I wish it were true. I should be a better actor.

Why do we take pleasure in being told of ourselves what we know is not true? We all do at times.

Meanwhile my poor Chris is suffering; and David is a cad.

He certainly is. He remembered, it seems, that he had a prior engagement. I don't envy the *fiancée*. I congratulate Chris.

Where is my horse-whip?

Laid up in lavender for a stage prop.

Behold my unheroic pose as outraged parent! The faculty of seeing two points of view is disastrous to heroics.

And so David goes free?

I think not. The *fiancée*, if she does not suffer a like disillusionment, will amply avenge her unconscious and wholly guiltless understudy.

Chris shall not play Ophelia—nor I Polonius.



## LETTER XXVII

London

13th March, 1919.

My dear Redgie—Yes, we will be conventional—you ask my opinion of the cast for the proposed revival of *The School for Scandal*. The mistakes in it are so obvious that it is inconceivable that they have not been made deliberately. To Mary Grey is given Lady Teazle and to Leah Bateman Lady Sncerwell. The latter is too clever and experienced an artist to fail in any part, but she has qualifications that fit her peculiarly for Lady Teazle and she would, if she were allowed, give a memorable performance of the part. Whereas Mary Grey has no qualifications for Lady Teazle but might be able to carry off Lady Sncerwell. As for the two leading men ; it wouldn't matter that Arthur Whitby is fat if he could be tetchy, but Whitby is geniality in perpetual effervescence, whereas the geniality of Sir Peter is always an effort. Doctor Johnson was fat and tetchy and we can well picture him as the type of confirmed bachelor, but we could never so imagine Whitby. H. O. Nicholson—whom I strongly suspect of being the best actor I know ; any way I can think of none better—can be equally convincing whether genial or tetchy : in a word he is an *actor*—which is not saying that Whitby isn't ; but there are actors and actors, those who *use* their personalities and those who *adapt* them ; and using personality is not the same as exploiting it. A great actor does all three on occasion—as Irving did.

Herbert Waring will be wrong as Joseph. His curious affectation of a lounging manner disqualifies him for period plays, though it fitted rather happily some aspects of the extraordinarily effective part he played in *The Adventure*

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN

of *Lady Ursula*. It won't fit Joseph. Waring was at his best years ago at the St. James'; he gave us then a series of very convincing pictures of nervous excitability. His Sir Brice Skeen in *The Masqueraders* was remarkably good, as was also a performance of his in a play called *Lord Anerley*—adapted, without acknowledgment, from an old yellow-back novel, whose title I forget. In it Bouchier appeared as Alexander's double, which to-day would seem impossible to the degree of amazement!

Leon Quartermain is to be Charles Surface—and later leaves the cast to play Mercutio in Doris Keane's revival of *Romeo and Juliet*. His Charles will be good—but not right. His Mercutio with Ellen Terry's Nurse—she won't know a line of the text—will be the hits at the Lyric, but it will be as wrong as his Charles. Mercutio is a swashbuckler. Quartermain will make him a courtier and something of a fop—which is Tybalt's rôle. Tybalt will be played as a black-browed bully (as usual) instead of the pale-faced fair-haired Venetian dandy:—"these strange flies, these fashion-mongers, these *pardonnez-mois!*"—whose self-consciousness and utter lack of humour keep him forever on the rack of irritability. But Mercutio, "bold Mercutio," "stout Mercutio," although the "Prince's near ally" is little of a courtier and nothing of a fop. I picture him always (as I do Benedick and Gratiano), with something of leather and steel about him. He practically describes his own temperament in his banter of Benvolio:—"thou art as hot a Jack in thy mood as any in Italy . . . an there were two such, we should have none shortly, for one would kill the other," and that reminds me of a perfect performance I once saw of Benvolio by—Guess. You can't. Granville Barker. Who would suspect him of it to-day? But for



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Mercutio : had you seen Terriss in the part you would know exactly what I mean. Even the Queen Mab speech comes better from this virile type ; the pretty-boy makes it effeminate, which is detestable.

I predict that Doris Keane will be sugary and shallow. But I admit to a prejudice against Shakespeare in Americanese : Basil Sidney should be good ; he is not effeminate. Has he poetry ? I don't know. Franklin Dyall is too hard for the Friar, but the words will be spoken beautifully.

And Ellen Terry will be—Ellen Terry ; a charming elderly lady in place of that abominable old bawd the Nurse. Strange how this character is always misrepresented and the verse cut to make her merely slightly unsympathetic, which is condoned by her age—for they always seek out some sweet-faced old lady to play the part. It will sound sacrilegious in Juliet to qualify Ellen Terry as “ ancient damnation.” Like Wyndham, she has a soul of eternal youth and, though she might suggest the mischievous Puckish spirit, I cannot think she will convey the coarse grain of the Nurse nor the blunt-edged cunning of her plebian type.

Talking of Puck, what a problem he presents. I find it quite impossible to conceive him in human shape. To my mind Puck and Ariel alone make the two plays—or rather, Masques—in which they occur impossible for the theatre. The exquisite poetry and humour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are too precious to be lost, so I suppose we must continue to tolerate inadequate productions of it, but a stage-play it is not.

In his most delightful book *Shakespeare's Workmanship*, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch describes how it should be presented : in the hall of some old country house—as a charade. He



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doesn't say this, but describes how he would set the stage to represent such a scene. But I can't conceive of the stage as a medium for the expression of an unreality. What is there shown must rely for its prosperity upon the degree of its perfection in creating the illusion of fact. If to make a myth believable we must present it in a suggestive and anachronistic setting, by all means let us do so ; but don't let us attempt a myth within a myth. That is why dream plays so often fail. The Public will accept one make-believe, but their credulity shies at a second make-believe within the first.

So, then, I would relegate performance of *The Dream* to the oak panelled hall with double stairway and gallery above the great doors opening on the park of some great country mansion. But even there we should be baulked. Quiller-Couch, for all the modesty of his demand, asks the impossible. For the end, he says, he would have the fairies "swarming forth from cupboards and down curtains, somersaulting down the stairs, sliding down the baluster rails." Imagine it—with Stedman's or Italia Conti's children !

There is no disguising it : fairies are not possible on the stage. The illusion of a single fairy may be created if, by a miracle, you are able to secure an appropriate personality ; but Peasblossom, Cobweb, Mustard-seed and Moth by children or young women of the ballet or chorus are what they are and no other.

You know Noel Paton's picture in the Edinburgh Art Gallery ; there you have the right suggestion of the elves and imps that Shakespeare imagined, but the effect is not possible with humans in the parts. Children are not small enough and far too clumsy, their undeveloped features

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cannot suggest the intelligence necessary to the illusion. And as for Puck—

I have seen Louie Freear. Did she play it in Tree's production?—I forget—or was it with Benson at the now demolished Globe?—at His Majesty's I think.

I preferred this quaint little person in *Boy Bob* or as the odd little Slavey singing *Sister Mary Jane's Top Note*. I found in her *grotesquerie* no suggestion of the elfin sprite and the effect on the exquisite fantasy was for me disastrous.

Then Titania—Oberon—

Julia Neilson made a beautiful Fairy Prince—and so did Otho Stuart at the Globe. Miss Neilson sang divinely, and yet—Somehow the very perfection of her vocalisation dispelled the atmosphere of faëry. Stuart did not sing but I couldn't help thinking—perhaps I saw the production too near to Christmas-time—rather of the Prince the fairies sent to Cinderella than of the Prince who ruled the Kingdom of Fairyland.

The three groups of characters do not blend : the Athenians—Well, we can accept them if the actors can speak the verse ; the Warwickshire Clowns—They also may be convincing—till they meet the Athenians, when each group destroys the truth of the other : the Fairies simply falsify both, without themselves convincing.

No, let us do the thing somewhat as Quiller-Couch suggests : in an old Country Mansion, by a flickering fire-light, with a single hanging lantern and a flood of moonlight in the forest beyond the heavy doors ; with the finest voices we can find to speak the glorious poetry ; the ripest humour we can recruit and the sweetest singers—who yet shall never *vocalise* but murmur their numbers softly from the shadows.

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-SEVEN

The alternative, as I conceive it, is to do it frankly as a Masque in some Banqueting Hall, or Throne Room, with rich dresses, tapestries, a blaze of light and no attempt—except in the Clown's scenes—at acting or illusion of any kind.

The same method would best suit *The Tempest*. Undoubtedly that is how both plays were first presented. Ariel is as impossible in the flesh as Puck. As Drama both plays must always fail : as Poetry both are immortal as the fame of Shakespeare.

Yours,



## LETTER XXVIII

London

30th March, 1919.

You accuse me of lack of interest in the Actors' Union movement. You are wrong ; it is not interest I lack, but comprehension of the mentality of those who, professing an Art, deliberately set out to coarsen it by commercialism. It is so easy *not* to go on the Stage ; there is no obligation. Also it is possible to leave it—though not so easy—if it does not suit you or you it. I have known several instances of actors giving it up and those not the least successful. But to stick at acting and in revenge for disappointment to drag the art down to the artisan level is a sin against the Holy Ghost.

No, that's not blasphemy ; for if the thing is not spiritual—an inspired gift—what is it ?

Such desecration is best left to the Butchers who run some of the theatres.

But, you may say, it is protection for real artists against those same Butchers that the Union seeks.

I will try to answer you.

I know little of the proposed plans, except by the printed matter that has been sent to me and by a particularly offensive letter or article signed by James Carew. But I know well that a great number of quite worthy but very shallow persons are attracted by what they conceive to be the glamour and glitter of stage life to follow a calling for which they have no call. And it is amongst these that you will find the agitators, who are reinforced by some of true artistic temperament who conceive, quite wrongly, that by sacrificing themselves they are somehow benefiting others.

The only way they could really benefit them would be in teaching them to act—which is impossible.

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

I repeat : acting is not an intellectual accomplishment, it is an instinct, which requires very special gifts to develop, among them a cast-iron constitution, extraordinary intelligence and unremitting application. The Art itself combines all the other Arts and yet remains the most elusive. In its highest form it sways the world—none other has such universal appeal. Success in it panders to the vanity even of the inordinately vain—hence its attractiveness.

But these of the Actors' Union to whom it seemed so easy and who find it is not the cinch that they supposed—since it means *work*—turn bitter in their resentment and seek to cheapen it, using that very weapon of commercialism under the lash of which they are squealing.

Curse the craven crew ! Can't you see that mainly it is the vanity of incompetence that binds them together—the fear of being found out ?

Because they have—what they call—acted they think themselves actors.

I might as well call myself a plumber because I can put a new washer on a leaky tap.

An actor is an artist or he is nothing and the artist knows that his individuality is his greatest asset ; he would pledge it to no union, association, guild or league to control or to compel. Any attempt to organise the artist is fore-doomed to failure, for in the moment that he is “ totted up ” and scheduled he is no longer an artist.

The work of the bricklayer, mason, plumber, carpenter, riveter bears positive resemblance—or should—to the work of another of his trade. The artist's work is valueless if it bear not the stamp of his *own personality*, and who shall estimate the worth of that ?

By the value he sets upon it himself you shall know him ;

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and though you may not consent to buy at his own price, the price he can get for it is the only standard of its worth—the actor's work is not like a rare print whose value increases with age—and if it be worth purchase it is for those very qualities that he would starve rather than barter his soul for to commercialism.

The only excuse for going on the Stage is an overwhelming love of the Art of Acting.

That “each man killeth the thing he loves” is the only excuse of the Actors' Union.

They tell us other professions have Unions and cite the Medical Association, but there is no parallel.

Are medical *students* admitted to the Association?

Are they allowed to practise while they are still “walking the hospitals?”

Do they not pay heavy fees for instruction and live on their means until they are competent?

Are they not obliged to pass examinations and win diplomas?

The Actors' Union demands payment for rehearsals.

Does a doctor claim payment for the time he spends preparing for an operation?

Would you trust a neophyte to amputate a leg or cut out an appendix? I wouldn't.

The analogy doesn't exist. It's a fallacy.

Science is exact.

Art is full of inexactitudes—physiological as well as terminological.

It is beside the point to say—as you might—that the modern actor is so cultured that he would make no use of the bludgeon that Trades' Unionism would place in his hands. If it be not for use why seek to possess it?



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

A bludgeon is a threat to break the peace upon the appearance of a problematical If. It's a dangerous weapon and when possessed collectively the existence of one hot-head among the possessors—especially if he have eloquence—threatens danger to the community.

The possession of a dangerous weapon implies the intention or desire to use it. That is why Scotland Yard makes stringent laws against the carrying of fire-arms.

Protection ?

In a long experience I have known far more dirty tricks—and dirtier ones—played by actors upon managers than ever I heard of as being played by managers upon actors.

I don't pretend to experience of the wrongs I am told are inflicted upon chorus girls in cheap *Révue* ; most of them, judging by their attitude and language in the Railway Junctions on Sunday journeys, would be more suitably employed in factories or as kitchen maids ; still there may be some excuse for these to form a Union of protection—and offence. A set price, agreed upon, for chorus singers would not affect Art one way or another. Should one of the chorus become an actor, he or she could easily leave the Union and acquire personal dignity with independence.

The Actors' Union proposes to fix a minimum wage (Note : It is no longer Salary) of Three Pounds per week.

Do you suppose that Irving when he played in the Stock Company at Sunderland would have kept his engagement had he demanded three pounds a week ?—or even half of it ? He wasn't worth it and he knew it. It was the work he did then for a salary (not a Wage) that was barely enough to live upon that helped to make of him what he became ; and the hardship was as much a part of the training as the parts he wrestled with.

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But suppose us Unionised and the minimum wage agreed upon.

Manager requires Francisco.

Is Francisco worth Three Pounds ?

By no stretch of imagination.

Rather should the would-be actor—I assume that only a beginner would accept Francisco—pay three pounds for the privilege of learning what the play of *Hamlet* is about—I mean in action ; presumably he knows as much as can be learnt of it in the study—although I doubt even that of the novice of to-day.

But Manager agrees (strongly resentful) to pay three pounds for Francisco. What must he, in justice, pay for *Hamlet* ?

At least three hundred, surely. But that is his share on a good week's business. It's absurd.

Regard it another way. Francisco gets ten shillings per performance ; then Ophelia, you must allow, may command no less than fifteen and ninepence.

Let us suppose Manager accepts that view. He offers the part in open market at that price.

But does he ? — will he ?—will anything compel him or induce him ?

“ No,” he says, “ I want Miss So-and-So.” But Miss So-and-So demands ten pounds per performance. True, she has never played in Shakespeare, but she would like to try, her pearls have just been stolen or she's given birth to twins and Manager thinks—considering the Press-boom she has had—that it may be a good investment.

Where is the Union then ?

It “ protects ” incompetent Francisco ensuring him a wage three hundred per cent. beyond his deserts ; but it

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-EIGHT

does not even pretend to assist a dozen competent Ophelias who are out-bidden or under-sold by another group of incompetents.

Now suppose the Union *in excelsis*, forcing the Manager to accept the first applicant and pay the agreed rate and obliging us to accept it ; for all actors must be members and none may undersell another.

Ophelia is to let at—never mind the rate.

A lady offers herself, suited possibly for Magda, Hedda Gabler or Björnsterne-Björnsen's Swava, but with no single qualification for a classic *rôle*.

Manager has seen her attempt Ophelia in a memorable revival and deplored the lamentable consequences, but he is compelled by the Union to employ her.

Imagine his plight ! Can't you see him tearing his hair ?

The Union, you understand, does not guarantee competence ; yet it seeks to force the Manager, not only to pay for rehearsals, but to guarantee a specified term of engagement. It would bind him to incompetence and oblige him to pay it. This must, in the end, break him economically.

Is this cricket ?

But I forget : cricket is a game Unions never play.

Now for your answer :—

It is that the Artist must make himself a necessity, so that the Manager *cannot afford* not to engage him under a contract whose terms shall be mutually agreeable.

Unless and until he can do that his services are worth just precisely what he can persuade the Manager to give for them—no more.

I repeat : it is quite easy *not* to be an actor. Many of us strive all our lives and achieve no more than that.



## LETTER XXIX

London

17th April, 1919.

It is sometimes quite impossible to establish perfect sympathy with the mood in which a letter is written though one may know the writer through and through ; and the temptation to be didactic on occasions is irresistible. Consider : the Post-Master-General takes charge of the letter and holds his tongue ; and though one's correspondent may peruse it in stammering indignation and proceed forthwith to splutter the said indignation on paper in scathing invective, the Post-Master-General keeps the lid upon all this moither until, refreshed and fortified by two nights' rest and a whole day of purring self-satisfaction, one unenvelopes the missive of contradiction. Who could not keep up his end of an argument in such conditions should venture to postulate an opinion never-no-more !

But you have a gift of words, Redgie, sometimes quite remarkable, and when you employ it to flay me I am duly chastened, even though I may enjoy the sense of not having deserved it. That sense of conscious martyrdom is the most despicable. The self constituted martyr has no sense of humour—no friendship or affection—no thought but for his miserable ego. He can tolerate all things but to be ignored. Hugging his grievance, he is a scourge to his neighbours while begging of them to scourge him. “Time brings in his revenges,” which is a way of saying there is Justice as well as Charity under Heaven. It is just that the bubble of a conscious martyr's vanity should be pricked ; though the prick be acknowledged merely as an added thorn to the prickee's self-adjusted crown. We should “wipe away all tears”—True, except

## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-NINE

those of self-pity, which do not deserve the courtesy of a kerchief.

I have known martyrs—But who am I to judge? What is Right for me may be bitter wrong for another. What is Wrong for me may be permissible, even desirable, in one who does not see with my eyes. I claim no license for myself and I would have none act in opposition to his conscience. In conscience is the God that judges. For God is not an Act of Parliament or a Police Court Magistrate with a rigid code in black and white which must be applied according to the letter, irrespective of circumstance or temperament.

You would remind me of the Ten Commandments and it is true that the Mosaic Law is the most admirable table of discipline yet evolved from human conscience by Divine inspiration; but I take—in all humility—a larger view of God's justice, which would not be equity if it did not weigh all the conditions in and under which we act. The parochial view of the Almighty as a suspicious Elderly Person of narrow views and limited faith in humanity is an insult; God is a Gentleman.

Do you remember the story of the wise Hebrew in *The Decameron*? It is, I think, the third novel of the First Day. The Sultan, wishing an excuse to confiscate his huge wealth, endeavoured to trap him to committing heresy by demanding of him which of the three great religions was the True Faith. The True Faith is, in fact, the one we *believe* to be true, as Boccaccio very well knew—as, indeed, he knew most things. I think there can have been very few men wiser than he. Shakespeare did well to borrow from him; and what he did not borrow he still might have found in his Book; for I have yet to hear of the plot, story, complica-

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

tion of incident that is not to be found in the wonderful Hundred Novels.

Shakespeare's most obvious cribs were the trunk incident in *Cymbeline* and the story of Gilletta which became *All's Well that Ends Well*; and of all the plays these two seem to me most to fall short of what they might have been. The obvious great scene is omitted in both.

I suppose *Cymbeline* was in a great measure a pageant on its original production. It affords such scope that elaborate production seems to be an essential part of it: the British Court; the Italian Palace; the Welsh Hills; the Roman Legions marching from Milford Haven; the Vision of Posthumus; the Battle; the British Encampment after the Fight. All these ask for the full glory of a series of gorgeous pictures. I regret I missed Irving's production, but, to say truth, I did not want to see him as Iachimo. But the play, of course, is Imogen and I regret that I did not see Ellen Terry play her.

Iachimo has been called "little Iago"—perhaps the name is a diminutive—but I can find no sort of resemblance in their natures. Iago is not a sensualist, as I understand him; whereas Iachimo is that first and always and of the most confirmed sort, the cold-blooded, calculating type. I see a stout, thick-necked, flap-eared, hanging-lipped Greek, the kind of beast we used to think of as the typical Cape I.D.B. when we were all preoccupied with South Africa. Think of his gloating calmness in the bedchamber, as, intent on winning his wager and quite unmoved, he schedules Imogen's extraordinary beauties. He is a connoisseur, but satiated. His unctuous enjoyment in his cold-blooded contemplation is an added insult to the femininity he is plotting to traduce.



## LETTER NUMBER TWENTY-NINE

Of course the thin-lipped type may make a good job of it ; Willard played it on those lines, as he played Sextus Tarquin, but, to my mind, his method was more fitted to the latter part : I am inclined to include it in my list of Great Performances I have seen. I certainly saw Willard do nothing better.

But the great scene that is not in the play ; imagine it, as Shakespeare might have written it, if, in place of Caius Lucius, Iachimo had found Fidele senseless on the headless trunk that she thought Postumus ! She knowing him (on her recovery) he never suspecting her. Remember, women are never recognised as women when male-attired in Shakespeare. Imogen waits, suspicious and watchful ; then in his tent, after the battle, when Iachimo lies wounded, helpless on his couch and memory of her dawns on him as she recounts her wrongs—

But there, no attempt of mine to describe it will equal your imagination of what Shakespeare could have made of it.

Then with Marie as Imogen and—Ah, who as Iachimo ? Louis Calvert has the figure, but—well, it would seem that Calvert has now given up acting.

But why speculate ? The play needs nine men to play fine parts. Think of it ! NINE who can all speak blank verse and *act* ! I don't believe there are so many on the stage.

Marie has too strong a personality for Helena. Of all Shakespeare's heroines I think she is the most difficult to cast. She is in no sense an actress type, yet the artist must be a consummate actor. If she should miss a single note of sympathy she fails. Gentle even to nobility, yet full of humility ; gracious, loving, lovely. The part does not play itself.

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And Bertram. How to gain sympathy for him? Yet it is essential. A frank impulsive boy, with a boy's natural cruelty—yet hardly vicious; the thoughtless cruelty of youth that we forgive; the kind that passes into a great gentleness and understanding as experience grows and youth evolves to manhood.

There is further use of Boccaccio's Wager on a Woman's Honour motive, complicated with what I may call the Substituted Bride theme—upon which Shakespeare founded *All's Well* and used again in *Measure for Measure*—in Dumas' *Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle*, translated by Sydney Grundy and produced at His Majesty's as *The Silver Key*, with Kate Rorke in the title rôle, Tree as the Duc de Richelieu, Lewis Waller as the lover and Mrs. (Lady) Tree as the Marquise de Pric—a character that greatly shocked Paris on the original production.

I wonder if you secured a real Strad. I don't know a thing about it, but reason seems to say that if the shopman knew it genuine he could have got a better price than £10 in London or some large centre. I'm afraid it was not a sporting chance, Redgie. A violin worth ten pounds in the lumber room for twenty years! No: two pounds or sixty, not just sober ten.

But you ventured.

Like you, I never regret my stupidities if I walk into them with open eyes. If I realise afterwards that my eyes were shut I want to kick myself. I'll buy a picture—when I can afford it—because I like it; never because a shopman swears it's a Murillo.

Well, I hope your Strad is a Strad, my last Chippendale was Wardour Street.

*A bientôt.*

## LETTER XXX

London

*28th April, 1919.*

If the bombs had to fall I do wish one of them had demolished Denman House, the South-Eastern corner of the block that is the Piccadilly Hotel. It is an eyesore, an affront, the monument of a wilful and deliberate effort to create an Uglier London. How an architect could reconcile it with his artistic conscience to become party to the perpetration of such an atrocity I can't conceive. Here is an edifice, not, perhaps, very beautiful, but symmetrical and of a certain dignity, and on one corner, where a massive pile should rise to balance the structure, a disjointed, inarticulate mass, crowned with a squat cupola and ornamented with a stunted obelisk, leans against it like Wee McGregor making a "long nose" at Rob Roy. The whole Parish of St. James' should rise in protest.

But who cares for Beauty now?

The Parish of St. James' is impoverished to pay doles to the indolent—too heartsick striving to keep a roof above its head and a bar to its door against the aggressive insolence of Labour to spare thought for Æsthetics.

The dignity of London has departed with its gaiety, for this new craze of feverish self-indulgence has no claim to the name.

Oh yes, we still have the Tower and Westminster, but they are solitary monuments and the atmosphere that once surrounded them has been exorcised by the demon of Modern Improvement, which might be an amiable devil if it had a soul.

It would not surprise me if, one day on my walk city-wards, I saw a contingent from Chelsea—my birth-place, I almost



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blush to own—painting the dome of St. Paul's to match my great-grand-Aunt's patchwork bed-quilt, a jazz of colours in cubist design. Strange how this *new* Art is but a revival of an old form ; but our ancestors knew better how, when and where to apply it.

The majestic stretch and sweep of Regent Street from Portland Place to the Duke of York's Steps is now broken and its unique beauty forever destroyed.

Of Piccadilly Circus nothing remains but the name.

Of the Cri., The Pav., The Troc., and the Café Nicole—Well, The Cri. remains ; and in place of the art of Wyndham we have *A Little Bit of Fluff!*

Wyndham !

My first recollections of him was in *Pink Dominoes* (1877, I think) and then I remember more clearly Augustus Harris as the boy with the air balloons. But I grew to know and love Wyndham as I watched him through a long series of Light Comedies. I think of him now as two distinct persons ; the dashing touch-and-go comedian of military carriage, with crisp, brown, curly hair and fair moustache—what *verve!* what easy grace ! what perfect *aplomb* and control ! what irresistible fascination !—and later as the middle-aged *raisonneur*, clean-shaven and grey, with unmatched charm and a curious break in the voice that added effect to a manner no woman could withstand. I believe he played Charles Surface with his moustache ; if he did it was unforgivable and I prefer to forget it—as I do his David Garrick and (with regret, I must add) Cyrano de Bergerac. I wonder what induced him to make that gravest error of his theatrical life. There was only one English actor who should have played Cyrano.

Wyndham was delightful in Louis N. Parker's *Rosemary*

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY

(written with Murray Carson) though he failed in the final Act. He had to be ninety years old and, as I told you, he could never play an old man, though he must have been close on seventy when he attempted it. But he was at his best, I think, in *The Case of Rebellious Susan* and *Captain Drew on Leave*; in the latter play he acted with delightful Marion Terry, whom I never saw but once at a disadvantage and that was as Mary Stuart when she most palpably knew nothing of her words.

Yes, I have happy recollections of The Cri., which from its unique position must always be a most successful theatre—if the play be light and even only tolerably good.

The little streets opposite were narrow, and no doubt it was best that they should go; I don't regret the passing of The Pav. — the present Pavilion Theatre is not recognisably the same.

And The Troc. ; that is wiped out also and I never miss it.

It is difficult to realise that these old-time Music Halls were crowded there together in their little back streets when there was no Shaftesbury Avenue and that The Cri. crouched in its dim narrow thoroughfare.

The string of Turns in these halls grew rather wearisome. I remember once sitting through a whole evening at one of them—I forget which—and listening to twenty-eight; and, as each lady or gentleman favoured us with two songs and some of them gave us three, Variety was hardly the term to describe the entertainment; especially as the majority of the songs lacked distinction either of melody or humour. Of course there were good Turns among them and of the sixty odd songs no doubt quite six were striking; but I remember no more than that I found the evening very dull. As I remarked on my first visit to a Parisian *Révue*:

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

If you want to find Joy and the Spirit of Youth you must take them with you. So it was very often at the old-time Music Hall.

But I have happier recollections of The Oxford, perhaps because I was allowed the honour of a seat at the Chairman's table. An important personage the Chairman of the old fashioned Music Hall ; he sat on a dais in the centre of the Stalls, at a table surrounded by a chosen few who enjoyed the privilege of paying for his drinks. He announced the Turns and lead the applause with his hammer (whose rap it was anathema to disobey) kept order and generally presided and directed.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Bessie Bonehill will now oblige"—or Mr. Charles Godfrey—The Great Macdermott—Mr. James Fawn—Mr. Arthur Roberts—and many I forget.

To hear Charlie Godfrey sing *Inkermann* or *You may talk of Colonel Burnaby* was a huge delight ; he hadn't an H in his composition, but the gusto with which he could "put over" a song was amazing and inimitable. Bessie Bellwood was another priceless personality. Vulgar ? Undoubtedly ; but a born artist and with all the innate and *insouciant* happiness of the cockney, the old fashioned cockney, the most care-free type, I suppose, ever known. The morose incivility of the modern taxi-driver and Tube porter is apt to cloud recollection of the friendly disposition of their predecessors. In those days the disgruntled ones drove four-wheeled cabs—hence the term Growler. Gentleman Joe, who steered the Gondola of London, is a type that has completely disappeared.

I daresay you wonder why I revive memories of these old Music Halls that are now so irretrievably of the past that you can form no true conception of them.



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It is because they were shrines of a very distinctive and very real form of art and I cherish remembrance of it as we preserve the kindred types of humour and wit in the work of Rabelais.

You may still see and hear Marie Lloyd, the sole survivor, last of a hardy race. I forget whether T. E. Dunville is one of the old ones, he is certainly of the old school. These two are unique; independent of their surroundings, they create their own atmosphere, focussing attention and filling any building.

Marie Lloyd is an institution and is allowed unusual latitude; she is a dynamo, physically and—un-morally. Her technique was always unrivalled; her appeal, which at one time was mainly sexual, is now impersonal. The lure *was* set to draw the assembled youth; it still exists but its appeal is for us all, regardless of age, and it draws us to consider the compensations that life holds if we can but develop to the full the sense of humour. Who ever has heard her sing, *Oh, Mr. Porter!* is not likely to forget it: Dunville, being of the male persuasion, is not so licensed; yet on occasion he exceeds his limit. This you would gladly forgive if you loved him as I do.

How is it that this form of entertainment has grown archaic?

Because the galaxy of *lions comiques*, as the Eighties called them, has dwindled to two.

They allowed themselves to be seduced out of their sphere to become Stars in Pantomime and *Révue*. Forsaking Music Hall-dom for Theatre-land, they became hybrids, welcomed in both camps, properly at home in neither; ousting the actor from his nest while the circus-clown, tumbler, balancer, tight-rope walker and juggler played cuckoo in their own.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

The two worlds of the Theatre and the Music Hall were as sharply divided as France and Italy. *Révue* has proved to be the tunnel of Mont Cenis. Both, now, are overrun by this form of amusement, which is not *révue* at all, but merely a batch of Turns loosely strung together.

When I was touring—oh, thirty years ago—with a Drury Lane drama our Leading Lady left us to play Principal Boy in a Pantomime. I wonder how many Leading Ladies could do that now!

The Leading Man in earlier days often became the Demon King at Christmas, with a Song or Recitation in the Cavern Scene. The Heavy Man became Will Atkins or the Dame. Only a few days since I met an old actor whom I have seen do both—and he wrote the Pantomime as well.

Pantomimes then were legitimate in the sense that they were constructed with a sequent story, had scenes of serious interest and were not interspersed with Turns.

Children loved them a great deal better.

It is not so long ago that Chris burst into tears during a Pantomime—the Comedians (in modern clothes) were busily engaged in working a prolonged Confidence Trick gag-scene, which no one appreciated as they did themselves: their efforts had certainly no remote connection with the story—the child couldn't stand it and exclaimed: "I wish those horrid men would go away! I want to see Cinderella!" Boo-hoooo- *ad lib*.

Briefly the Music Hall Comedian has assassinated Pantomime and is now himself rapidly nearing dissolution.

But I shall go and hear Marie Lloyd and Dunville just as often as I can and I advise you to do the same.

Yours,

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY

*Tuesday, 1 a.m.*

*P.S.*—I have been to see the Princess at her matinée. She has improved her performance a hundred per cent. I believe she suffers, as I do, from an inability to give her best on the first night when the verdict for good or ill is passed. She must conquer this ; it is part of the cause of my failure. As regards her performance ; all is now harmonised, reconciled and co-ordinated ; the light and shade is perfect—could not be better. Had it been so in the beginning——But what use to speculate !

She came with me after to tea in the Savoy lounge. We talked of Helena. She says she wants to play her and now I believe she could.

Which reminds me that I forgot to tell you of the scene which I wish Shakespeare had put into the play—in place of some things we might quite easily have dispensed with. I refer to the climax of Boccaccio's novel in which Gilletta presents her twins to Beltramo. Had Shakespeare thought to use it he would not have needed two babies to multiply effect in the maternal appeal and complete the humanising of Bertram. Instead, he gives us one of his well-made final Acts, gathering up all the threads and tying them off with perfect stage-craft, as in *Measure for Measure* and *Cymbeline*, but leaving Bertram unfinished—at least, so I always feel—and Helena just a little less sympathetic than she might be. I should have preferred that deep resonant chord of maternal appeal as the note of the reconciliation.

“I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly”

does not convince me. It is bald.

Marie tells me you are coming to town next month. I look forward to our meeting. We shall talk—at least



*LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR*

I know I shall—and you, Redgie, are a Heaven-sent listener.

I don't think my play will live through the Summer.

Chris returns at the end of June.

And I have another tinker's job!

Good-night.

## LETTER XXXI

London

8th May, 1919.

Oh, for a breath of pure sweet wholesome sentiment in Art—the Theatre, Novels, Music, Pictures !

The so-called Realists refuse to see Beauty even when it is actually beckoning them ; and when they must perceive it delight in debasing it.

If I were a painter I would give you two pictures of a ruined French village and both should be unmistakably recognisable. Both should show you vividly the last epic struggle in the little church ; but while one portrayed nothing but horror ; the desecrated altar, the scarred pillars and the shattered glass, blurred with blood and smoke ; the other should show the sun-rays piercing the maimed vault, re-consecrating the altar, healing the scars and resolving the splinters of the holy pictures into glittering rubies, topazes and sapphires, typifying the glory of self-sacrifice and triumph ; and none should dare say the latter was less true than the first.

But Art to-day seems to be merely glorification of the Ineffectual.

Of set purpose it holds up distorting mirrors and delights in exposing the foibles and failings of poor humanity.

The contemplation of Slavonic ulcers and Teutonic gangrene may be delectable entertainment for the neurasthænic, but the cutting out of social wens, goiters and abscesses, steeping them in the cankered spirit of hysterical visionaries and using the Theatre as laboratory for their exposition, must inevitably revolt the public conscience at last.

If Art does not exalt—ennoble, the exponent is a charlatan with the soul of a sewer-rat.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Deliberately to use the forms of Art to pander to base passions is rank blasphemy.

The German Reinhardt sent us *Sumurun* and beautiful as some of it was the taint of unhealth was in it. There were suggestions so coarse that only the fact that it was "made in Germany" commended it to the snobbery of certain leaders of fashion who delight always in the product — as Gilbert says—"of every Country but our own." As a home-produced effort it would have failed: it would have lacked that unwholesome spice.

But to me the vice of allowing the picture to sprawl outside its frame on what has come—since its introduction then—into common use in every *révue* under the name of the Joy-plank, was its worst offence. Reinhardt, in that ballet and later in his productions of *Ædipus Rex* at Covent Garden and *The Miracle* at Olympia, sought to make his audience an integral part of his entertainment.

It won't do. It will never do. It may have a vogue for a season, even for a few years, but it cannot be permanent. I believe the greatest debt we owe to David Garrick is that as Manager of Drury Lane he was the first to put the audience in its proper place; on the other side of the floats in the auditorium, as spectators.

Something of the atmosphere of *Sumurun* pervades the production of Arnold Bennett's play *Judith* at the Kingsway Theatre. It is impossible to describe it exactly except by the one word—unwholesome. Presumably it is presented as the author wished. There is no attempt to reconstitute the period, but merely to create an atmosphere that reeks of some indescribable loathly decadence, suggestive of unholy rites in secret places.

"A pious coquette ogling the Chief Eunuch:"—That is



## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY-ONE

how one critic described the Judith of Lillah McCarthy and I wish I had had the wit to say it first, for it crystallises in perfect prism my impression of this performance. Miss McCarthy's art is distinctive ; in parts as various as those she played in the Norwegian play *The Witch* and Shaw's *Man and Superman* (pyrotechnic dialectics!) she could not be bettered. Her stage personality is aromatic ; the scent intoxicates, not with the fumes of frankincense and myrrh—as Judith's should—but with the acrid tang of hyssop and vinegar—it whips to alertness. In *Samson and Delilah* Saint-Saëns' music undermines “with voluptuous swell” the stern morality of the religious theme. In this version of *Judith*—how different from Madame de Girardin's that Rachel played—the moral sense is equally corrupted by the *mise-en-scène* and the atmosphere of decadence that pervades it.

There is one performance—But, no, I won't speak of it ; nothing so revolts me as doubt about the sex of any human animal. It was a relief to contemplate the robust manhood of Claude King whose Holofernes is incredibly Biblical but indubitably male.

The two wisest and most helpful books—as well as the best English—I ever read were Shakespeare's and the Book of Job, and I find no pessimism in either. You may wish to argue about Job, but you won't about the other. Of course things—everything—have a confusing number of angles ; the number is, indeed, illimitable to every concrete fact, but we really are not called upon to consider them all.

“To thine own self be true.”

Where there is light there must be shadow. But light is Truth ; shadow is mere negation, a mist, a vapour, an unsubstantial exhalation. It settles on us and in our

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

weakness—in that untruth to self (which creates injustice toward others)—we lack the moral force to rise through it into the clear sunshine of Truth which is there behind the cloud.

Art and Religion are curiously blended.

True Art *is* Religion, for it is an aspiration towards the expression of all that is best in creation, which is another way of saying—worship of God.

And Religion is Art, for the more sincere the expression of our veneration for the Supreme, the more artistic its form must be.

I have seen also a play called *Victory* at the Globe Theatre and thought it very bad. You know I like what the critics call melodrama, if it be good of its kind. This isn't. You may consider it unsound to say that if the parts are good the play must also be and I am sure the average critic would laugh at such a statement, but that would be because he did not trouble to understand all I mean in calling a part good. There may be a part attractive to the actor in a bad play that is not really good intrinsically, but I am sure there is no really good play without at least one good part in it. In *Victory* there is only one good part and that a very small one ; a Chinaman, which is made good solely by the art of the actor, George Elton. But Elton is guaranteed to give a fine performance of anything : one day he will give us a great performance, if any manager is sufficiently astute to afford him the chance. There is another part, Mr. Jones, that might have been great if the actor had known how to handle it—and if it had had anything to do with anything. Even as it is it is far better than the actor, who, I surmise, is playing it only because he looked like the producer's idea of it as he walked into the manager's office.

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But to my point : a part can't be good unless it is psychologically credible—or can be made credible by fine acting—and unless its influence is vital to the development of the plot. Now surely if a play holds such a part it must be a good play. I can think of no instance where such a part existed and was *acted* and the play failed.

Can you ?

Yours.

*P.S.*—*Victory* is an adaptation of a novel by Joseph Conrad ; that is no reason why it should not be a self-contained work. All plays should be that—adaptations included. Adaptation is really a very difficult art though universally sneered at. Woe betide the adapter who relies on scissors-and-paste ! he will fail lamentably, for that is precisely the way *not* to do it. It is the spirit of a book that must be expressed in the different medium ; merely to transfer the characters and their dialogue without, what I might call, the author's rubrics, is to present them in two dimensions only. In *Victory* neither the characters, the environment nor the story are clearly defined. I have not read the book but I suspect scissors-and-paste.



## LETTER XXXII

London

18th May, 1919.

The great mistake you altruists make is to suppose that those of different fibre suffer as you would if deprived of certain advantages you enjoy. You are quite wrong. They have no conception of what you would miss and therefore never note the lack of it. Rather are they to be congratulated than commiserated. The cruelty you inflict upon them is in striving to cultivate in them a sensibility foreign to their natures; the seed of which, however, breeds in them the germ of discontent. You torture yourselves in imagining how you would suffer were you in the circumstance of those you choose for your pity.

No doubt you would, but they don't.

You can't miss your Rolls-Royce if you have never possessed one and to preach that they have a right to one without working for it is to inculcate the deadly sin of Envy, which is a double-edged wickedness because it "gnaws inly" as well as prompts to violence. It is inhuman to train to a taste for butter the palate that has always been content with margarine.

That is where the Reformers step in and delude the tender hearted. They say in effect; if the Duke of Westminster has a Rolls-Royce why should not his dustman? If I enjoy butter, why not my tweeny?

The argument is not sound. Carry it a step further—all sound arguments can be carried the step further. Which is preferable; a Rolls-Royce for every individual—or for none? The only possible conclusion from the social Reformer's standpoint is the extinction of the Rolls-Royce.

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY-TWO

Breed is everything. Birth would not be the first thing if it were not the most important.

You don't pity a cart-horse for not being a Derby winner—and you don't pity even the non-starters: you are only sorry you backed them—if you did; and that teaches you to be there on the scratch yourself.

But these Reformers, who reform nothing and nobody and find their delight in raking out cess-pools and stirring up stagnant filth—these howling Leaders, who gain notoriety and a big income by preaching Class-hatred, inciting to arson and murder and inoculating the incompetent with the deadly virus of Envy, just stink in my nostrils.

Individuality is our one great God-given asset. “’Tis in ourselves that we are thus and thus. Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills are gardeners . . . . . the power and corrigible authority of this (all that we may elect to *be* and *do*) lies in our wills.”

What? you say, you quote the Arch-Envious in support of your thesis!

To which I answer: It is not Iago's shrewd, hard common sense we have to fear but the perverted conclusions he bases on his facts; therein lies his potency for evil.

“The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose”—  
and he is wise.

“And oftentimes to win us to our harm  
“The instruments of darkness tell us truths.”

Mephistopheles is no fool; he knows better than to base insidious wickedness on lies, his premises are sound—and so, perhaps, are some of Mr. Smillie's. It is in the false deductions he draws that the evil lies and in their application to the wrong sort of intelligence.

Listen to Mr. Smillie now dictating to the whole nation.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

He has the gift of the gab and a *flair* for the effective kind of sob-stuff equal to Walter Melville's, and equally shameless assurance in offering it to the crowd, who lap it as—No, “cat and cream” is too dainty a simile—who swill it like hogs, guzzling, slobbering and wallowing in it like the gluttonous foulness they are. For the mob is foul in its senseless, conscienceless, bestial cruelty; it can only mar—tear down—crush and stamp out. It is individuals only who build, never the tub-thumper, rarely the orator, generally the silent thinker.

By all means let the chords of sympathy tang but preserve their melody for the deserving; don't waste it on those who have “no music in their souls,” who are fit only for “treasons, stratagems and spoils” and give only hate in return for it.

You imagine that Gwendolyn is happier with her clean pinny and her hair tied with pink ribbon, playing with her ten guinea doll's house in her expensive nursery than Sally in her ragged frock and smeary face, making mud-pies. You are wrong—though I believe you'd agree with me in this particular instance, but you don't *apply* it. The lower orders, so-called, have always had a better time than the middle classes and as for the aristocracy—except for a notable few, who make a lot of noise (or rather have a lot of noise made about them) so that we are apt to think they are the majority, when in reality they are but a small minority—their responsibilities are so enormous, and for the most part faithfully fulfilled, that their lives are passed far otherwise than in the pleasant pastures that Mr. Smillie pictures for his deluded ones. I doubt he believes it; he's too clever.

It is the vulgar newly rich who give Society its bad name,



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and they flourish in all grades ; they are to be found among the riveters on the Clyde and the miners of South Wales, where they are just as pestilential as in Mayfair.

There is nothing—absolutely nothing ! you can tell me about poverty. If I seem to lack sympathy with those who do not rise from it, it is because I know that all that is needed is the will to do it. It can be done, even though one may be cast down seven times. I have starved more times than that and I may again.

There is no sympathy for the unsuccessful actor. Why should there be for the plumber or bricklayer who fails ?

We started equal, for my means consisted of less than a modern Board School education when the loss of my Father obliged me to take five shillings a week in the City. My Mother's meagre pension did not pay our rent. How we lived I don't know, but we never begged and we never stole and what we borrowed has been paid back.

I have never known success and now it is too late to hope for it ; but I love my work as well as though it had rewarded me. I know my failure is due to my faults ; and that no one has ever given me a helping hand must be because I have not deserved it.

But these people—I mean the plumbers and bricklayers—prey upon *me*, they conspire against me and rob me of my hard earnings by means of their Unions and legislation their tyranny has enforced. I have to educate their children—doctor and feed them, and my own kiddie and I may starve for doing it.

I have been sneered at by the modern golfing actor because I started as a Super.

I have always been shabby, of necessity, and now that I can afford a decent coat my pride won't let me wear it.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

I don't know quite how you'll regard this. I only know how I feel about it. Pride is a much abused word and perhaps I am abusing it. What is the right word anyhow? I won't be pitied—certainly not by those I despise. I don't want to despise anyone, but I should despise those who would be polite to my new coat as they have never been to my shabby one.

Manners ! Manners !

Is my shabby coat bad manners ?

I know it was not when I could afford no better—so long as it was clean and well brushed. But now——?

To whom do I owe duty more than to myself? I have few friends but no man ever had better. The first friend I thought I had I dropped like a hot cinder from the day I heard him say: "What's the use of friends if you can't borrow from them?"—I don't forget Cicero's first Law of Friendship: Ask nothing of thy friend, and I don't claim to be wiser than he—Those I have kept I wouldn't change for——Well, for success !

But here the immutable Law of Compensation gets to work: though I am not aware of any active enemy, there are some, I know, who cordially detest me. I suppose that is inevitable. I don't think I dislike them for it. It's a terrible handicap at times to understand. If you don't you butt through where understanding makes you stand aside for another to pass.

Who was it said: "The man who never made an enemy never made a friend." If nobody did here you have it.

There is one man—and I can think of no other—whom I really dislike. I won't use a harsher word; I certainly don't hate him. He is a manager and twenty years ago he did

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY-TWO

me as dirty a trick as one man could do another. We meet sometimes, but never see each other. One day we met in a lift. The conversation was amusing.

“After you.”

“Thank you.”

And he scowled because I was laughing.

Yes, I do say and always shall, that Manners are more important than Morals, because, though we are concerned for the morals of the few who are near and dear to us, we are affected by the manners of all with whom we must rub shoulders every day and all day long.

But all this has nothing to do with Mr. Smillie. My hatred for him and his gang is quite another matter.

Procrastination is a national characteristic but it is not chiefly responsible for the Nation's troubles. I can quite believe that Mr. Smillie's gang may attempt the assassination of King George ; but if they were to shout that intention in Trafalgar Square now—to-day, the ineradicable English trait of refusing to suspect evil intent in any one, even the proven enemy—very lovable and generous as it is—would let us watch the murder being done and then say : “This is very deplorable !”

I hate these Labour Leaders because their preaching is degrading those who might be loyal citizens—because it is subversive to law and order—because it encourages denial of the essential virtue of Reverence. I hate them because they are enemies to England.

The Red Flag is the negation of individuality ; it stands for the brutish mob, which has no faculty of reason, but only instinct, grasping, cruel, destructive.

Where is the personal dignity of the old Guildsman who took pride in his labour ?—in the chair or table he had made



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

—the lock—the pot—the boot—the watch he had fashioned *with his own hand*?

It has been killed by the licensed conspiracy of Trades' Unionism.

Mrs. Silver is at work in the passage with her Bissel. Do you know what a Bissel is, Redgie? a vile invention! like most labour-saving devices it compensates by racking nerves. It squeaks as it rumbles on a sort of mezzo-soprano note; it works in swathes, back and forth, with the regularity of waves breaking on shingle; and when it stops its pause is as trying as its perseverance for you dread its recommencement.

I succumb to it.

Yours.

## LETTER XXXIII

London

31st May, 1919.

What is my favourite part ? .

Do you mean of those I have played ?—or of those I want to play ?—or of those I imagine ?

The greatest parts written in my time, I think, are Herod, in Stephen Philip's play ; Giovanni dei Medici (I believe it is Giovanni) in *The Cardinal*, by Louis N. Parker ; Pierrot in Laurence Housman and Granville Barker's *Prunella* and Cyrano de Bergerac.

I have not read *Herod* and my recollection of it calls to my mind a *matinée* audience (with only some thirty people in the Stalls) rising in their seats and cheering again and again Maud Jeffries for her beautiful performance of Mariamne in the second Act.

The critics had never a good word for this lady. It has always puzzled me, for, in addition to an admirable technique, sense of character, a musical voice and gracious manner, she had splendid force, exceptional beauty and inherent charm of personality. No doubt she has them still and is happier out of this precarious and disappointing profession in her Australian home.

I met Maud Jeffries, for a moment only, on a railway platform when she was Wilson Barrett's Leading Lady, on one of those impossible early Sunday morning journeys that the touring actor suffers, and was astonished by her freshness and vivacity in circumstances that show most women at their dowdiest.

Her Mariamne moved me profoundly and not me alone, but, as I have said, everyone else in the theatre.

Tree was Herod ; at least, no, he wasn't, for he could

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

never be any part that needed the Grand Manner—I don't mean by that anything stilted or rhetorical, but just clear and firm diction, dignity and grace of gesture and that subtle sense of period, that seems now one of the lost arts. But one could see the wonderful part with all its wealth of opportunity sticking out through his inadequacy.

*The Cardinal* was, I suppose, not a very good play. Parker is always graceful, but not always dramatic. It was rather severely handled by the critics ; but I feel sure that had it been acted with inspiration it would have been lifted to a level that demanded higher consideration, and the Public would have crowded to its performance.

*Prunella* is a sheer joy. I put it with Besier's *Don* and *Quality Street* and count these three the most delightful light plays of my time. I have seen three Pierrots : Graham Browne—neither fantastic nor spiritual—Granville Barker—understanding, but too intellectual—and Milton Rosmer one of our very best actors, yet again too material. It is not strange ; all the circumstances of the modern actor's life are against his preserving idealism. If he be successful he goes into Society—God help him ! he takes the chair and addresses meetings ; which means he must become a politician. It is true politicians *act*, but they don't act poetry—which is Truth and Beauty—if they did they'd become Statesmen.

Cyrano !

Now I'm going to say some horrible things. I never quite believed in Rostand ; brilliantly clever, of course, but wasn't he the least bit a showman ? No conscientious artist, I feel, could have so subordinated his puppets (they are no more) to his main conception. Consider Raguenu. What a character he might and should be ! Where is the soul



## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY-THREE

of Roxane? Christian is a mere lay figure. To me—though a great work—the play seems written for pelf and the glorification of the actor-manager, one of those so lacking in self-confidence that he feels it essential to dwarf the other characters in order to magnify his own. It is a curious, paradoxical form of vanity but very prevalent.

But the part of Cyrano is wonderful—ininitely greater than the whole, which is a distinctly disagreeable knock for Mr. Euclid.

I have seen Coquelin and Wyndham play it and now Loraine. Wyndham, I am happy to say, I forget; I don't remember him in one single scene. He made up as the Duke of Wellington—funked the nose, which in Coquelin's case was the one God gave him, slightly exaggerated: it didn't even alter his expression. Loraine's is clever, but produces the effect of a mask. Cyrano's nose has always had too much attention. It is the *Pons Asinorum*. Paragraphist asses exaggerate the difficulties of negotiating its bridge.

Consider the play. What remains in the memory? Act I—the most effective first appearance of Cyrano. The duel as he composes the sonnet. Coquelin quite perfect. Loraine admirable though not so entirely effortless as the Frenchman. Act II—Coquelin's wonderful art in obtaining fifteen varieties of expression on the word "*oui*." But the scene is built up to this. Correct application of technical skill does it. Loraine does it. There is no denying that Coquelin did it to perfection. Act III—the picture of the balcony. Loraine's translation is inadequate. An adaptation in sound prose would have been better than the affectations of this verse—with interjected French phrases. The music of the words is *all* in the original—and enough. Act IV—Cyrano recites to a piccolo accompaniment. Brave

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

again ! He has all our sympathy. But note ; he hasn't yet started to act. That comes with Act V—the dying scene.

Coquelin used to dogmatise that acting is not art if the actor feels. *Ars est celare artem*. Quite so. But he must *seem* to feel. By all means study every gesture and expression before a mirror—as Kean did—and turn them on consciously as and when the effect requires ; but if your audience detects the mechanism, what then ? You have not concealed your art and cannot therefore claim to be artist. Q. E. D. This is where Mr. Euclid scores.

Coquelin gave me the biggest artistic disappointment of my life. True, he had played the part, perhaps, a thousand times, when first I saw him in it ; but that was his fault ; he was his own manager. An actor should be at his best about his fiftieth night ; and most, I think, steadily deteriorate after two hundred consecutive performances—with spasmodic exceptions.

However, excuses aside, Coquelin didn't overwhelm me and for this reason : although I was seeing the play for the first time I knew to a fraction what he would do next ; I was aware of his elaborate care in the preparation of his mechanism and was able to anticipate his every movement—to foresee the precise means he would employ to create his next effect. It fascinated me. But although I admired his cleverness, I forgot the play and Cyrano in studying Coquelin. I felt as Casablanca must in watching a game of Chess. I noted how exactly the chair had been placed and knew to a stagger every pose he would adopt before dropping on to it—and I was furious to find myself right every time.

Lorraine's dying scene is excellent, though it seems over

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long because of the poverty of the translation. For one thing I heartily thank him ; a great rarity in these days ; I could hear every word without effort. But he seemed a little too precise—never carried away on an inspiration.

I wonder if the part is really so great after all !

But you were asking about me.

I'm too old for Pierrot, but I should like to try the others. If I failed it would not be from ignorance of the pitfalls.

But if you were asking me about the parts I *have* played—I expect you'll smile—but when I was young I had more joy in Claude Melnotte than any I can think of. I mean actual joy in the doing of it. The inevitable applause of the audience ; the exhilarating effect of being allowed to express freely all the primitive and varying emotions, with the knowledge that their frank expression is essential to the acting of the part : the comedy of Act II, the dignity and restraint ; the climax of Act IV and then the final outburst of Act V. Yes, real joy !

Hamlet ?

I have never played him long enough at a stretch to get to the state of enjoyment. For all one may have spent months in preparation, ease and confidence in such a part require that the actor shall have stood outside himself and listened—watched—calculated and experimented in collaboration with an audience for weeks before the composition can be to his satisfaction. Then comes the process of adapting to his limitations, physical and vocal, the effects he designs to express and the assimilation of those traits of character that contradict his own. This, of course, applies to every part, but as Hamlet is the greatest these considerations strike one more forcibly in approaching it.



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Benedick is delightful to play, but memories of Irving create diffidence.

Shylock is easy, though not easy to excel in. I never knew a Shylock to fail utterly.

Of all the parts I would prefer to satisfy myself in I choose Macbeth.

“Vaulting ambition,” eh?

No actor has ever yet achieved it as far as I know—Burbage, of course, excepted.

The ideal part?

Shall it be Subjective or Objective?

Do you follow me?

Shall the play be his story—as *Hamlet* is?—or shall he obtrude, as Shylock does, into the story of Portia and Bassanio?

The first may better satisfy the actor’s vanity; but think of the responsibility!

Why does Mercutio never fail? Because he is incidental to the story and being most perfectly composed seems greater than he is. Romeo is most difficult; he is continually overshadowed by Juliet and he must reconcile a dozen varying mental attitudes entirely unsympathetic to the English estimate of manliness. Yet Romeo is the subjective part; the story is his; Juliet comes into it and swamps it and him.

I would choose to enter unobtrusively and grow to the climax.

In a play of Dumas’; *Urbain Grandier*, I think; the leading part (played by Mélingue) was discovered on sentry-go and half the Act was over before he came into the action. That’s ideal, to my mind, for a start. Then he shall finish the Act with some vital sentence—a shock of surprise or

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humour. Act II must keep light but vital because Act III will be strenuous : some great conflict of emotion culminating in passion. For example Act III of *Othello*, if there were no Act IV and we had to pass after it straight to the Bedchamber. Act the last : death of course. There is hardly a great part that doesn't end in death ; how other can it end ? True *Œdipus* does not die but his end is the more terrible.

I played once a very fine part in a forgotten play of which I heard it was said that surely a man never died so happy—and that should be true of *Hamlet*.

But the public won't admit that death can be the happy end, though individually they know, if happiness there be and death is inevitable, that happy death is the only possible.

The ideal part must be tragic, of course : Pity and Terror. Adversity borne cheerfully ; no whining, no sentimentality ; an example of courage.

But the actor hardly puts ethical consideration first. Though he knows his Art may be—and should be—a great moral force, he does not devote his life to it for such reason. The artist suffers an irresistible urge to express some message nascent within him, which—though too often as it materialises becomes mere self-glorification—had in its inception an essence of spiritual beauty.

## LETTER XXXIV

London

12th June, 1919.

Yes, Redgie, my son, I follow your *chemin de penser*, as you call it ; though you have a most weird sense of catenation and employ the ellipse with feminine *insouciance*. But I think I have succeeded in following your wild leaps—like the moufflon (isn't that the little beast's name ?) from crag to crag of solid argument, across the gulfs of improbability and the unfordable streams of sheer impossibility.

You are an idealist, Redgie, but with one foot at least on solid ground ; something of a puritan ; much of a dreamer ; but, thank God ! nothing of a prig.

It is strange how complementary you and Marie are to each other. She has, so to speak, the other foot firmly planted. She is catholic in taste ; no less idealistic yet more practical and strangely venturesome. But, no ; one doesn't say that of a woman. Women don't venture ; guided by intuition, what would be adventure in a man becomes merely fairly safe speculation in a woman. But one quality that I most admire in her is that, though she is so entirely womanly, she never presumes on her womanhood or cheapens it. That is saying much in these times when so few of her sex are concerned with upholding its dignity. You might not credit it, but I have actually seen a stage-hand open a door for her !

Did I not well to christen her Princess !

But for your argument. It seems to amount to this : that as the Theatre can only exist as a commercial enterprise, it is impossible that the Art of Impersonation should survive, since the Public will visit it only to see its favourites ;



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and if they personate their admirers may not recognise them.

To this my answer is that the great mass of the Public go to the Theatre in the simple frame of mind of the child who says : " Tell me a story." . That is the lure of the Theatre for the many.

But when they are there, in order to hold them, a spell must be cast over them ; a spell they can't analyse and don't understand, which is made up of the personality of the actor and very technical skill ; a mixture so subtle that even professional critics are unable to disentangle its components and continually make the mistake of giving credit to the author for what is purely the actor's work—or belongs to his personality—and *vice versâ*. Only recently Sidney Carroll, who really seems to have the good of the Theatre at heart for all his brutality—which I would readily welcome if it were more reasoned (he is too fond of giving us his conclusion without stating his premises)—stated that acting can be learnt. That's absurd. It needs no argument. It simply can't be—any more than painting or music can be learnt. It may be improved by teaching and experience, but if it is not instinctive it can never be acquired.

The Public don't know it, but a great actor, when he appears can—as he always has—triumph over the weaknesses of an indifferent play or one so well known as to be banal, and draw them to the Theatre simply to see *him* !

Remember the state the Drama had fallen to when Kean appeared.

I think it was not much better after Phelps before Irving revived it.

To-day, though not in such sad case perhaps, it lacks a head.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Worst of all ; think of it at the Restoration when Betterton gave it dignity.

Since Shakespeare formulated it, so to speak, out of chaotic elements—without disrespect to Marlowe or the other Elizabethans—it has needed the coming of a great man no less than five times.

Betterton in 1660. Garrick, who with all his faults unquestionably gave it distinction, in 1741. Kean in 1814. Irving in 1874. And now we await the fifth.

In point of time—according to the rule of arithmetical progression—he is long overdue.

The present demand is all for Comedy and we can present a polite comedy in quite respectable fashion but even so we have no great outstanding figure.

Hawtrey, Hicks, Du Maurier.

Hawtrey has always leaned rather towards Farce.

The great Comedian must be “the glass of fashion and the mould of form”—the type of his epoch. He must epitomise it. The future must be able to look back upon him and say : “He stood for his period.”

Hawtrey grows old, alas ! and a trifle stout—comfortable-looking. That does not express 1919.

Hicks ?

To my mind, brilliant. I shall never forget his Valentine Brown in *Quality Street* ; the delicacy, the finish, the humanity. And in *Sweet and Twenty* (I think it was called) at the Vaudeville, a most beautiful performance. Yet even he does not typify the Age. He has understanding and sympathy ; but to express a period it is necessary to probe to its heart and expose it ennobled—dignified.

It would be difficult to express the dignity of 1919.

Perhaps the polished cynicism of Du Maurier best typifies

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its attitude. "Who cares?" would seem to be his motto, and his shrug as he watches the curling fume of his cigarette-smoke and carelessly flicks away the ash seems to comment, "I don't!"

Charles Mathews stood for his Age: by his art he expressed it.

I am assured by one who played with Mathews that Wyndham was but a pale reflection of him; but Wyndham expressed the manners of the end of the Nineteenth Century to a nicety.

Why are those thrones empty?

Because actors not content with observing Society—their necessary function—claim to be *of* it; and the Social round is stultifying to Art.

The artist must be untrammelled.

"Going into Society" implies the conforming to rigid conventions of conduct and manners entirely unfavourable to the bohemian atmosphere where alone inspiration is bred and nourished.

There is no term in common usage more abused than bohemianism. From time to time youthful coteries meet and imagine that by adopting certain affectations they can create the atmosphere. But bohemianism is an elusive emanation of the artistic spirit and can evolve only in unconsciousness. It is nurtured on single-hearted devotion to Art and fostered by the Spirit of Youth.

"Whom the Gods love die young" does not mean that those blessed ones shall de cease in infancy or in their teens, but that the spring of eternal youth shall bubble in their hearts even though their patriarchal beards may wag or the common house-fly annoy the baldness of their pates.

But I am rambling and ignoring your letter—Forgive me.



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

It is true that we all need solitude at times. Dostoievsky complained that the one real torture of his exile in Siberia was that he was never once *alone*!

I find it difficult to believe that I should ever feel your companionship irksome, for—like my Father and Chris—you have that gift of sympathetic silence that does not create the *terrifying* feeling that it may be broken suddenly and inappropriately—as Rupert Brooke's girl broke it.

“You came and quacked beside me in the wood.

“You said, ‘The view from here is very good!’

“You said, ‘It's nice to be alone a bit!’

“And, ‘How the days are drawing out!’” you said.

“You said, ‘The sunset's pretty, isn't it?’

\* \* \* \* \*

“By God! I wish—I wish that you were dead!”

If you remember all you have to tell me and I to ask all I want to know we shall have no silence when we meet next week.

But we shan't remember.

Do you know that feeling that comes at the end of a job when you want to stand still for a few moments but all the wheels are whirring relentlessly and you have a sense of guilt because you know you are missing things—letting them slip by when you should be keeping abreast of them?

There's no time ever to stand still in this world. A job done, another should be started without hesitation or delay. To break that law is to break faith with oneself—which never pays. Of course if Conscience doesn't apply the spur one is quite justified in lazily treading water—Yes, I know; mixed metaphor! Well, I am swimming the stream on horseback. See! and I don't know whether I'm Conscience or the horse. Anyway treading water, metaphori-

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY-FOUR

cally, is an exercise that irks me excessively ; but activity is useless without direction.

There is no doubt that I suffer dreadfully from lack of concentration. For instance ; I woke this morning repeating over and over certain lines of Macbeth and couldn't get rid of them. A well-ordered brain doesn't do that. It is evidence of vacuity. I could find explanation—or rather, invent excuse—but that would be to add dishonesty to futility.

*Au revoir, bien espéré.*

Yours unchangeably,

Hicks is the *mauvais garçon* of the English theatre, Hawtrey the *bon diable* and Du Maurier the *preux chevalier*—*sans cœur*.

## LETTER XXXV

London

24th July, 1919.

I don't say Edmund Kean was the greatest actor England ever produced—I have already told you that, in my opinion, Richard Burbage must have been that—but he was surely the most remarkable. In the parts in which he excelled he was probably greater in certain passages even than Burbage. As far as I can gather, though he took great pains to compose a character, he *could* not or *would* not give his best work to those phases of it that did not appeal to him ; and certain aspects of the great parts—as, for example, Macbeth and Hamlet—he was temperamentally incapable of rendering. The metaphysical, though not, perhaps, beyond his comprehension, was outside his sympathy—beyond his range of expression.

At his house at Rothsay, Isle of Bute, Kean set up, on equal pedestals, two statues—to Shakespeare and to Massinger. To me this is eloquent of his mentality. That anyone should, for one moment, think of these two playwrights together—let alone side by side—is utterly incomprehensible. But gratitude, no doubt, leads us into excesses as strange as its opposite ; and Kean owed much to Massinger.

What Garrick had done in 1741 Kean did in 1814. Both introduced in the contemporary Theatre a new and natural method ; but whereas Garrick merely modernised, Kean humanized.

Garrick found the Stage occupied by mouthing ranters ; he adopted a polite method, in keeping with the artificiality of his period with its affectations of snuff-box, lace kerchief and cravat, cane, Louis' heels and bag-wig. He “ ex-



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purgated " Shakespeare's plays, at the same time elaborating certain scenes with a graceful pen and a style not without wit, easy, flowing, well suited to the fancy of his time. He cut the vulgarities and made all *nice*—I use the word in its Eighteenth Century sense.

The days of the great orators and soldiers when Kean appeared were more robust.

Kean, probably, could not write at all—dialogue, I mean ; his letters do not suggest it—though he was far from illiterate. His correspondence was sprinkled—somewhat too liberally—with classical quotation : but this was a literary vice of his age.

Garriek was praised for the grace of his literary efforts by no less an authority than Doctor Johnson, whom, though Garrick's devoted friend and admirer, we dare not suspect of partiality in such regard.

Garriek, I feel sure, colloquialised the masterpieces.

Kean, with his perfect instinct for the Art, qualified by the intense suffering he had undergone—an essential part of an actor's training for the grand rôles—humanized all.

In a word : Garrick's touch was light, quick, mercurial.

" He never could stand still," said George the Third.

Kean appealed by his sonority and dignity. Of his Shylock Douglas Jerrold said it was " impressive as a chapter of Genesis."

Garriek's great advantage was in the fact that he had humour.

Kean had none. No man who had a sense of humour could drink himself to death. I once knew a man, said to have great sense of humour, who did it, but his was really a sense of fun—mistaken by many for the same thing. He

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was an inveterate practical joker and in his cups would indulge all kinds of curious fancies ; for instance, he would chase his wife round the dining-room table brandishing an open razor. I surprised such a scene on one occasion, the poor lady was my god-mother. Her husband died eventually of cirrhosis of the liver. I never thought he was even funny.

The story of the triumph of Edmund Kean at Drury Lane on the 26th of January, 1814, is well known. Briefly the Committee of Management of Old Drury were at their wits' end for a Star. Business was appalling. The provinces were scoured for a new leading actor. Huddart (father of the celebrated Leading Lady, Mrs. Warner) had just failed—as Shylock, I think. As a last resort “Mr Kean, of the Theatre Royal, Exeter,” was billed, and took London by storm.

Kean came to London fully equipped ; he had no dreadful first performance to agonise through. All his parts were studied, tested by a hundred repetitions in all sorts of places—barns and wayside inns as well as theatres—and before all kinds of audiences ; and to London playgoers he presented a new—a human Shylock. Before that night they had experience only of glowering elocutionists bound by the convention that the actor must always present his full face to the public and never abandon the classic pose. Kean *impersonated* ; he discovered to his audience the marvel of Shakespeare's intuitive knowledge of human nature and his genius in exposition and thereby made manifest his own.

It is on record that, when the curtain fell for the first interval, a large number of the occupants of the Pit—there were but fifty there, all told—dashed into the street and



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endeavoured to persuade—in some cases actually coerced—the passers-by to return with them into the theatre.

I am not going to pretend to criticise Kean's Shylock. In some respects I don't believe it was a just interpretation. He played for sympathy. Now Shylock cannot help winning sympathy however he is played; the Christians in the play behave so caddishly that the Jew is certain to show up as a dignified, even noble figure by contrast. But to act the part deliberately for the purpose of obtaining sympathy is, in my judgment, to make sure of forfeiting some of it. But let that pass.

Kean's greatest triumph was, perhaps, as Othello, a performance that beyond all question has never been approached since. But his failing, to which I have referred, marred in some degree the opening Act for in the speech before the Senate he *would* not exert the full strength of his intelligence and his powers. His voice was rough and raucous in the middle and upper register, though wonderfully melodious in the lower tones. He found small opportunities in the narration of Othello's history of his wooing for use of his most effective notes and contented himself with the trick of changing from rhetoric to conversation in the final couplet—which won its recognition from the public. The London playgoer of those days was critical, he knew the text and applauded points, he was appreciative of skilfully employed technique. But in Act III and thence to the final catastrophe he was gripped, held and finally carried off his feet by such a whirlwind of passion, such masterly interpretation as eclipsed all memory of other histrionic achievement.

I should like to give you detail but I want to show you the scope of Kean's work, and if I start talking of any one



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of his great performances I shall not have space or time to-day to complete the outline of the whole.

His most popular impersonation was Richard the Third : with this he drew the largest sums to the treasury. Once he was induced to play the part three times in one week ! He would never appear more than four times, and only upon that one occasion more than twice in the same character.

How wise !

He refused to do this again for the excellent reason that he “ would not *stale his art* for any committee.” If modern managers and actors would appreciate all that this implies we might hope for some better acting and more interest on the part of the Public in the qualities of the actor’s work ; but this is only one of the death-blows that commercial considerations have dealt the Art.

Another great performance of Kean’s was as Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger’s *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* ; and it must have been wonderful indeed to have created the sensation it did, for of all the obvious, ill-drawn characters Sir Giles is surely the worst because the most pretentious. The play itself is like nothing in nature ; the verse halts, the plot is dull, the drama contemptible. There is not a quotable line and, to my mind, the whole thing is unadulterated balderdash. How anyone dares mention the name of Massinger in the same breath with Shakespeare is, to me, amazing. The play has lived, then, solely because Sir Giles affords scope for a display of epileptic passion. And in this Kean easily eclipsed all others. Mrs. Glover fainted on the stage with horror at his fury. The old actor, Munden, aghast, gasped “ Is it possible ? ” It is recorded, too, that the actor of Wilford in *The Iron Chest* was similarly

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struck speechless with terror by the concentrated hate Kean expressed in the part of Sir Edward Mortimer. No one has since been able to instil life into this dreary play. Luke, in Massinger's *The City Madam*, he made peculiarly his own—as Macready was to learn later—and Zanga, a sort of blend of Othello and Iago, in Dr. Young's *The Revenge* was among Kean's favourite and most successful rôles.

Most of the prints of Kean (other than the well-known one as Richard) picture him as Coriolanus and I expect he was superb in his delivery of the passionate invective :

“ You common cry of curs ! whose breath I hate.

“ As reek o' the rotten fens.”

As Macbeth, with his qualifications and technical accomplishment, he could not fail to have been magnificent in the Murder Scene ; yet, as I have said, he missed something of the mysticism of the character—the introspection—psycho-analysis, as would be said to-day. Should it not be psychæanalysis ? He would miss that sense, in the last Act that Fate was hounding him. I can see him facing boldly all Siward's forces, but it is not Macduff and the Scottish thanes, nor yet Northumberland's army, that conquered the guilty King ; he succumbed to an element more dreadful, and that dread—since the actor lacked the metaphysical sense—it was outside his range to convey.

Hamlet, too, was a disappointment but the scene with Ophelia was very beautiful. No doubt he rose magnificently to the Play Scene, but the soliloquies would irk him. Graceful he was, yet hardly “ the sweet Prince,” consciously exercising fascination, yet not perhaps “ the glass of fashion and the mould of form.”

His Romeo was remarkable only for the splendid fury

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of his onslaught upon Tybalt (he was a magnificent swordsman) and for his passionate *abandon* in the Banishment Scene.

He stood "like a statue of lead" in the Balcony Scene, but in the Tomb (he used the Garrick version) he gave "a noble and powerful display."

Opinions vary about his Kately in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*; but there is no doubt, I fear, that Kean failed as Abel Drugger—in Garrick's adaptation, renamed *The Tobacconist*, of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. The correspondence on this subject between Mrs. Garrick and Kean is one of the stalest of theatrical jokes:

"Dear Sir, You cannot play Abel Drugger, Yours, etc., Eva Garrick.

"Dear Madam, I know it, Yours, etc., Edmund Kean."

So he may have had some humour after all.

Mrs. Garrick was now an old lady of ninety-two; after his triumph she invited Kean to her house in Adelphi Terrace and presented to him the stage regalia worn by her husband as Richard. They became great friends, but quarrelled violently at intervals, notably in regard to certain readings in *Hamlet*.

Rallied by his friend on his failure as Abel, Kean asked: "Could your Davy sing?" His widow answered "No." "Then," said Kean, "I have at least one advantage over him. I can." He was, in fact, a sweet singer and would spend hours alone with his piano.

Amongst Kean's triumphs was the repetition of Betterton's stupendous effort in galvanizing into life the artificial character of Alexander the Great in Nathaniel Lee's tragedy *The Rival Queens*, a feat no other actor had satisfactorily accomplished since Betterton's time. I have a copy of a week's



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receipts taken from the books of the old Theatre Royal, Hull, which I enclose.\* You will see that he did not spare himself. Its chief interest is in the light it throws upon the relative drawing power of the plays and in the order in which he elected to perform them. *Richard the Third*, you will note, though usually his most popular part, was almost the least attractive and Alexander no doubt the greatest physical effort since he reserved that for the Saturday night.

This subject of Kean's acting is inexhaustible, an endless one for speculation. What was he really like?

Read his Life by Hawkins (much prejudiced in his favour) by Molloy (more circumstantial, founded for the most part on old documents) and by Barry Cornwall (who knew him personally and was not too partial) and even then you won't be able to decide. Read Hazlitt and George Henry Lewes' criticisms of his performances; above all note what they do *not* say. From that you may deduce much.

I must not write more now. As I told you I am tinkering again—a costume play this time of Powder period. I like it, but the dialogue lacks distinction. You shall hear more of it—if it prove worth while.

When do you return home?

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\* The Theatre Royal, Humber Street, Hull (opened in 1810).  
Edmund Kean's Week.

1819.				£	s.	d.
Monday, January	4th	..	<i>Richard III</i>	96	14	6
Tuesday	5th	..	<i>Hamlet</i>	136	0	0
Wednesday	6th	..	<i>A New Way to pay Old Debts</i>	151	0	0
Thursday	7th	..	<i>The Iron Chest</i>	96	0	0
Friday	8th	..	<i>Othello</i>	114	0	0
Saturday	9th	..	<i>Alexander the Great</i>	210	10	0
				£804	4	6

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## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

I am stuck in town ; no sea for me this year, and, to my mind, no holiday is one without it.

Do I seem luke-warm in praising Kean ? I am not so really. There is no doubt he was a genius, one of the very few who have ever acted.

A genius is one who discovers an elemental truth.

Think of all *discovers* may mean and you'll get my thought, for to discover is not only to find but to expose to view—to expound — to express — to flash to the intelligence of others.

That was how Kean excelled them all.

Do you pass through London on your way home ?

Yours,

## LETTER XXXVI

London

10th August, 1919.

You remember Pepys' reference to Beck (Rebecca) Marshall — her sister Ann was also on the stage—whom he quotes as being the first "female actress." I had always thought this distinction belonged to Mrs. Saunderson (who became Mrs. Betterton) but I have now discovered that the honour is claimed for Mrs. Hughes (Prince Rupert's mistress) and that the part in which she appeared was Desdemona. The occasion was celebrated by a Prologue—"To introduce the first woman that came to act on the stage, in the tragedy called *The Moor of Venice* ;" the date, the 8th of December, 1660 ; and the management Killigrew's at the Vere Street Theatre in Clare Market.

But Mistress Hughes is not profoundly interesting ; Ianthe, as Pepys called Betterton's wife, *is*—because she was the wife of Betterton.

It is difficult to get Infallible Tom, as Betterton was nicknamed, into correct perspective.

You must remember that the Revolution having swept away the Elizabethan Theatre, a new model had to be sought in the new era that succeeded the Restoration. The Art of that period was moulded on the Greek and the Theatre did not escape the influence.

A resonant voice, correct features and a graceful though inelastic pose I take to have been the first qualifications of the tragic actor of that epoch.

Thomas Betterton, who is praised for his manners and his scholarship at a time when the players were very low in the social scale and had, most of them, other occupations, generally of not very distinguished sort and often menial,



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

was no doubt far beyond his fellows intellectually and shone accordingly. He was the son of a cook in the royal household and was apprenticed to a book-seller. It is said of him—as it was said of Garrick—that he became fully competent to play all the great parts with less than three years experience.

It is incredible—in both cases.

But, anyhow, Betterton was the first actor of whose personal dignity as a man we have any precise record and it was he whose performances revived popular interest in the Shakespeare Drama.

Between Betterton and Kemble came Colley Cibber and James Quin and it would seem safe to assume that the tradition Betterton followed—or rather created—was even more stiff, more unbending, more formal and more exact than that which Kemble adopted, for the tendency is always to relax. But we have precise information as to Kemble's method and if he had **more** elasticity than Quin—Quin than Cibber and Cibber than Betterton—Well, God help Betterton! He **must** have been a marble effigy.

But so it certainly was *not*!

Vanbrugh, Wycherley, Farquhar and Congreve were the favourite authors of Restoration days; the Town and the Court flocked to performance of their social satires, and the Court of the Merry Monarch was very human. That Betterton lured it and the Town to see his presentations of the masterpieces proves that he had extraordinary gifts of insight and imagination to win and hold them.

Cibber, who was no mean critic, was his ardent champion and what he writes is confirmed by John Downes (for forty years prompter at the theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields) by Pepys and by Sir Richard Steele who wrote in *The Tatler* :—

## LETTER NUMBER THIRTY-SIX

“ I have hardly a notion that any performer of antiquity could surpass the action of Mr. Betterton in any of the occasions in which he has appeared on our stage.” (Do please admire this English.)

It was agreed by those who saw both actors that as Hamlet and Othello Betterton far exceeded Garrick. He was instructed in his reading and the business of Hamlet by Sir William Davenant, said to be the natural son of Shakespeare himself.

Shakespeare left two daughters : Susan, who married John Hall, by whom she had one daughter who left no heir, and Judith, who married Thomas Quiney, by whom she had three sons who left no heirs.

Thus Davenant—if this theory of his birth be exact—was the last remnant of Shakespeare’s blood. He was Knighted by Charles the First in 1643. Milton saved his life in the days of Cromwell’s usurpation and, to return the compliment, Davenant saved Milton’s life on the Restoration in 1660.

Sir William Davenant obtained from King Charles the Second the Charter under which our National Theatre of Drury Lane still exists.

There was an old actor of the Blackfriars’ Theatre, named Joseph Taylor, the successor to Burbage in the part of Hamlet, from whom Davenant learned much and who probably assisted instruction of Betterton ; he could remember the precise directions of Shakespeare himself.

Of the result Downes says : “ His exact performance of it (the part of Hamlet) gained him esteem and reputation superlative to all other plays ; ” and Betterton continued to act the part until he was seventy-five.

What appears to have impressed his critics most is the

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fact that he did not rant on the appearance of the Ghost, which is caustic comment on the performances of his contemporaries.

But Betterton acted Sir Toby Belch with equal effect and success. This I take to be the greatest tribute to his powers.

He was not tall, blunt of feature, with small eyes and a voice "low and grumbling," and, though of more strength than melody, he could "tune it to any climax."

Cibber speaks of the "fierce and flashing fire" which he threw into Hotspur. Also he says of his Brutus:—"like an unheeding rock he repelled the foam of Cassius."

Now all this is very fine, but I want you to remember that it is also recorded that Betterton, who was short and tubby and of most unprepossessing countenance, in declaiming used his right hand *only* for gesticulation, while he kept the chubby thumb of his left tucked between the buttons of his waistcoat.

There was but small attempt to dress the parts in character, and, though Betterton was the first to introduce scenery, production was of the most primitive.

Don't you agree with me that the performances must have been little better than mere Readings, with but the faintest attempt to create illusion?

I suspect they were wonderful character Recitals.

Such art might be acquired by training natural aptitude in two or three years; whereas, as Irving said, there needs at least *twenty* years to acquire mastery in the technique of acting, and even then *all is never learnt*.

Betterton, like Garrick—save for a very brief training—and Macready, *started* in the leading parts.

Betterton lived until 1710, he died almost on the stage



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after playing Melantius in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*.

Cibber, who was nearly forty when Betterton died, and lived to see Garrick in his best days, speaking of him in the great Shakespearean rôles, says: "Should I tell you that all whom you may have seen since Betterton's day have fallen far short of him it would still give you no idea of his particular excellence."

Macklin bridged the gap between Betterton and Kemble; while three others formed arches, so to speak, under the span—Cibber, Quin and Garrick.

Charles Macklin (born M'Laughlin) was twenty at the time of Betterton's death, if some of his biographies are to be believed; others assert that he was not born until 1700. He was Garrick's mentor and, but for the handicap of a pronounced Irish brogue, would, no doubt, have taken a very high place in our theatrical history as an exponent of the Classic Drama. He it was who rescued Shylock from ridicule, though Kean was the first to abandon the tradition of the red wig. Macklin was also the first to dress Macbeth in suitable attire. We know Zoffany's portrait of Garrick as Macbeth in bag-wig and scarlet coat.

As late as 1788 Macklin appeared in the same night as Shylock and as Sir Archy MacSarcasm in *Love-a-la-Mode* of which he was the author. But the part in which he was most celebrated—after Shylock—he created in every sense, for it was he who wrote *The Man of the World* and therein acted Sir Pertinax MacSychophant, a part in which he so excelled that his performance was not even approached for nearly a century—when Samuel Phelps played it.

It is interesting to note that this remarkable old man,

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who in his middle age appeared as Osric, Mercutio and Touchstone—the First Gravedigger, Fluellen and Polonius, Malvolio being his only Shakespearean leading part and Iago his only tragic one, first acted Macbeth—at Covent Garden—when he was eighty-three (or seventy-three if he was not born until 1700) and as Richard the Third *three years later* !

Of the others I have named, Cibber, who lived to be eighty-six, was more remarkable as a writer, a wit and a man of Fashion than as an actor ; though he wrote and played the celebrated character of Lord Foppington. It was said of him that by perseverance alone he attained his eminence—he was for awhile Manager of Drury Lane—but a man does not excel in so many branches of Art and business without very peculiar abilities. His Sir John Brute in *The Provoked Wife* was much praised, for he acted it *as a gentleman* ! But to me the author of *She Would and She Wouldn't* needs no stronger recommendation. Its wit, its intrigue, its characterisation and its joyous humour are a priceless possession. How sad that our Stage has lost the art of properly interpreting such masterpieces.

James Quin, the ponderous, took no thought of the art of characterisation. He was a thundrer pure and simple, yet his reading was always logical, clear and incisive as well as dignified even to impressiveness. But he lives in memory chiefly as the perfect Falstaff, for which his huge figure—he weighed twenty stone—fitted him ideally. He played this part in his own undisguised personality—as indeed, he did all parts. His amiability and excellent humour made him much loved and though the Public forsook him often again and again he won them back. It was said of him that he would be “ long remembered with pleasure for his



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Brutus and his Cato," which, the critic added, it was hoped would "help forgetfulness of his Richard and his Lear." On the whole his art was on a superior plane to Macklin's and he reigned as King of the Theatre until Garrick dethroned him.

There, I have done !

I believe you asked about these fellows simply to pull my leg. Because I have my own ideas of the interpretation of the Classic Drama you think to pulverize me by mention of the great names of the past. But they don't frighten me ; they are all old acquaintances. I often think of them—as men, not as monumental abstractions—and I don't believe they were any more flawless than bloodless.

Quin and Macklin were especially human in their different ways. Quin was something of a great gentleman, a wit and a swordsman of exceptional skill, Macklin almost the wild Irish boy who might have been a model for Lever with all the virtues and the failings of the type.

So the American actors, I see, have struck, twenty-five theatres closed !....I suppose we may expect our Actors' Union to declare a strike in sympathy.

The commercial men have it all in their hands this Autumn and their plans are made. A man I know is paying £550 a week and *thirty-five per cent. of all receipts beyond that* for a London theatre. Such terms are strangulation.

Everyone is on holiday but the waiting crowds for *Chu-Chin-Chow* were never greater.

Yours amazedly,



## LETTER XXXVII

London

23rd August, 1919.

You are kind to say you find interest in my sketches of the old actors, though I am sorry you think I "bestow praise grudgingly." I wonder if you guess what is in my mind.

Remember this: but for accident the genius even of Kean would never have come to light. May there not have been many, before his time and since—though circumstances are all against it in our day—whose genius no lucky accident has revealed?

One day I will give you my definition of what constitutes the truly great actor—his essential qualities and requirements. I think then you will understand what I am driving at.

Meanwhile, as you ask me, I will try to continue my sketches though the material is not so interesting.

Lord Byron, who was a member of the Committee of Management of Drury Lane Theatre, said of the actors of his day that George Frederick Cooke was the most natural; Kemble the most supernatural—he meant no doubt, above the commonplace-natural—and Kean the medium between the two.

There is no doubt that Cooke was great; he was a genius sodden with drink—more drunken than Kean ever became; never at his greatest until he was drunk and never remaining throughout a performance at his top form, because if he started properly drunk he would finish so improperly drunk as to be incoherent.

The influence of alcohol on acting deserves a monograph.

Of the Stars in their order, as I have detailed them to you,

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I told you that Betterton, Garrick and Macready started in leading parts. I believe this is artistically a great disadvantage.

William Charles Macready, who was intended for the Bar, abandoned that career to take a share in the Management of his father's theatre in Manchester; not from inclination but from filial duty, owing to his father's distresses. It seems to have given him a grudge against the Theatre, which he never forgave.

Macklin, by the way, obtained for Macready Senior his first London engagement. That old man, you see, almost links Betterton with our own times—my times, that is; though Macready had retired he was still living when I was born.

Macready started in Birmingham as Romeo and played all the great rôles for forty years. He became Manager of Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres. He stood alone, pre-eminent in the profession, after the death of Kean. His nod was law, his disapproval was damnation—and he was hard as the nether mill-stone.

But his acting?

“Kean the most intensely human; Kemble the most severely classical; Macready the most romantic.”

We have talked of the meaning of romantic; the writer of the above in a magazine whose name I forget, probably used the word as we have agreed to understand *romantique*.

That most exemplary *paterfamilias* was surely never *romanesque*. It is enormously to his credit that he overcame certain natural disadvantages. His height was five feet seven inches, his hair was light and his eyes blue, yet capable of great expression. Of his impersonation of Beverley in *The Gamester*, a critic remarked that he would

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have been excellent "but for the unaccommodating disposition of nature in the formation of his face."

Macready was intensely in earnest: his success was achieved by unremitting toil. Fanny Kemble said he had no ear for verse. I am sure he had no sense of humour.

It is on record that his Benedick was appalling; though a crowd of sycophants gave his acting the credit that belongs properly to the author.

He had a magnificent voice for a declamatory passage, a frame of iron and, I surmise, no nerves.

He would have made his first appearance in London as Luke in Massinger's play *The City Madam*, expurgated and re-christened *Riches*, but for the fear of challenging comparison with Kean.

He played Iago to Kean and Kean "walked round him"; but that is nothing. The Othello who lets Iago be remembered is not Othello.

The two great faults recorded against Macready are that he was not poetic (How then would he be *romantique*?) and that he did not *personate*. If these indictments be just he was no Shakespearean actor—could not have been.

His great successes with the public were as Claude Melnotte, Richelieu, Virginius and Werner.

He was the original Claude and continued to play him till he was sixty. It is difficult to imagine the part done in his slow and ponderous way. I suspect the play itself—then quite a new type—was the real attraction, together with the Pauline of Helen Faucit. Pauline is by far the better part and Helen Faucit, by all accounts, was fine in it, and Macready inordinately jealous of her.

Then Bulwer Lytton wrote *Richelieu* for Macready, one



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of the greatest acting vehicles ever conceived and, to my mind, almost a great play. Modern critics won't allow this, but then very few of them have seen it *acted*. It hasn't been for over thirty years. Such performances as there have been were mere travesties of a great part.

*Virginus* of Sheridan Knowles was also originated by Macready. Another magnificent acting chance and I should say his most satisfying effort. His death scene is spoken of as especially beautiful.

The character of Werner in Byron's "ill-written play" as William Archer calls it, is a study in melancholy and no doubt well fitted his sombre spirit. It was German in origin, no doubt, like *The Stranger* of Kotzebue.

In Shakespeare his most popular performances were probably Lear and Macbeth, by reason of his enormous physical strength.

His Macbeth is spoken of as lacking kingly dignity; however his first Act was impressive and his last immense in its force. If he did steal in to murder Duncan "with crouching form and stealthy step" the reading is not unwarranted.

Kean saw "in a flash" the whole meaning of a character—Coleridge said that to see him act was "like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning"—he became imbued with its spirit and could commit no psychological error in its delineation. Macready did Kean the justice to admit so much; adding that when his intuition failed no amount of study enabled him to correct his conception.

I wonder if he intended this as derogation. I don't feel it so. The truth about a character *does* strike one in a flash as a complete conception: it can't be put together like a jig-saw puzzle; it would fit too accurately and lack what

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I might call the ragged edges of nature—its contradictions and inconsistencies.

Macready considered Kemble “greatly over-rated.” There, as you know, I cordially agree with him.

In proof of Macready’s industry I recall that in his diary he admits that he was fifty-seven before he satisfied himself as Iago. He never tired of striving to improve his Hamlet. As Othello he failed, wanting “majesty of character,” a quality more deeply ingrained than mere dignity of diction and bearing, which, no doubt, he had to the full—in repose. He was, I suspect, a man too anxious about his personal dignity to be entirely dignified. Majestic is no word for him.

He was much reproved for ranting.

Macready was an extremely selfish actor, which, as I have said of others, is the strongest proof that he lacked the essential qualities of greatness.

There can be very few living who witnessed his farewell performance in 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, which doubtless had similar effect on theatrical business to the opening of the Earl’s Court Exhibition thirty years later and of The White City in more recent times.

Macready upheld the dignity of our profession while he was in it ; though he was not too kind in writing about it after his retirement. But conditions were very different in his day. There were no long runs and Managers were sorely put to it to find new plays of a dignified type.

I have at last seen *Abraham Lincoln* and quite understand its success ; it is deserved. I won’t say it is a fine play because it is not a play at all, but it’s a very fine part. Some of the audience when I was there loved it ; one near me was bored to tears. I enjoyed it in spite of the terrible young



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lady who mumbled through the unnecessary Chorus and—excepting one man in a series of small parts and two old actresses—the utter amateurishness of a Company of earnest novices. The mounting quite satisfied me, substantiating my theory that the practicabilities in scenery are the first essential, the rest can be done by lighting, furniture and suggestion and the avoidance of anything wrong, I mean the discordant or incongruous. The actor is little—Lincoln stood six feet four inches—awkward, but not ungainly in the way I picture Lincoln; he edged along like a crab, Lincoln should move with a swinging slouch. He was ardent when he should have been impassive—romantic when mere commonplace would have made double the effect; but the part carried him. It was the Author's triumph.

I have been trying to think of the ideal actor for Lincoln and I feel sure there is none who would do it better than Herbert Lomas. Do you know his work?

Not so many years ago this company would have been most severely dealt with by Pit and Press for making no attempt to speak American dialect. Lincoln was frankly Belfast-Irish.

Yes, my engagement is over. I must admit the part was amiability itself; no effort, nothing at all to act, but entirely sympathetic and agreeable. If one is reduced to doing that sort of thing for a living, that was quite the most agreeable sort of thing one could wish to do.

Yours resignedly,



## LETTER XXXVIII

London

*4th September, 1919.*

Who was the critic who said : "This new writer will take her seat among the immortals ? " Had he said "grow her wings" or "wear her halo"—Well. But "take her seat!" Where would she take it?—and would she sit on it when she got there?—and why?—and what advantage? and do immortals sit, anyway? Very lazy of them! Why don't they get busy? Do they sit and write?—I mean: would she?—and why write if she were immortal? Anyhow I don't see the necessity. I don't want to be immortal if I should have to sit and write all the time. The advantage—or one of them—I should say, would be that one would never be so tired as to want to sit, but just run round all the time being immortal.

Don't you think most critics are inflated asses? They get so puffed up in the knowledge that they are going to be printed that they think people will swallow any bilge it may please them to emit; and most people gulp it down simply and solely because it's in print. Asses!

I'm afraid modern poetry is too profound for me. I read your friend K——'s verses, but I just don't understand them. They are nicely rounded—have a pretty lilt and the writer is evidently full of contrition for something he has done—I can't quite grasp what—for which he thinks God needs propitiation. He obviously conceives God as very narrow and misunderstanding, needing to have motives explained, or He may be in danger of misjudgment. To me it sounds very like insulting the Intelligence that created him—but, as I say, it has a pretty lilt.

Vandal, aren't I? not to be able to appreciate verse just

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because it is verse, without looking for some thought that I feel is happier for being expressed in that form.

And here, you say, is Marie—who is in an engagement, mark you!—asking: “where is Content?”

I can tell her where it is *not* in once: and that is anywhere she may seek it. Content is one of those things that just happens. You find yourself in it—if you ever do—without premeditation: in a few happy moments each of which is worth paying for in years. I think they generally lie in giving and seeing joy of the gift in a loved one’s eyes. The supreme moment of content is in giving the soul where it is welcome. There is perfection.

“A state of being”? Hardly. The moments are not long enough. Yet they endure for an appreciable time; they are not mere flashes; their radiance illumines years. Real content once known does not leave the void you imagine; it is not a mere “phantasmal essence,” which implies unreality—a dream—a will o’ the wisp. One may miss it altogether, but to know one moment of it compensates for years of suffering and its memory redeems even a lonely future from utter blankness.

God fits the burden to the strength of the back that must bear it, and if we elect to shoulder burdens that were never meant for us we are fools and deserve the fractured vertebræ we shall probably get, for we are merely conniving at, aiding and abetting, the selfishness of another—who probably jeers at us for our pains. Self-sacrifice is not a duty because it is unpleasant; but it becomes a duty when its object is just and the burden to be borne, though too heavy for the shoulder that struggles with it, may yet be within our capacity.

But you asked me a question.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Is Blank Verse an aid or a hindrance to Acting ?

Neither ; if you accept my definition of Acting as the work of a skilled and technically accomplished professor of the art of Impersonation. To him the delivery of verse is as easy as prose. But the effect on an audience will be different. In a verse play, just because the spectator will be more impressed by the dignity and poetry of the author's diction, he will imagine that the acting is better. It is considered a greater achievement to excel as Juliet than as Rosalind only because it is more impressive. The measure of skill required is probably equal ; but the audience will, in reality, be swayed by the qualities of the personality of the actor (I hate the word actress and the clumsiness of authoress—no one suggests doctress—I should have said artist). To some the comedy temperament may appeal more ; others may be more influenced by the grandeur of tragedy. But these considerations only cloud the simple issue. Bad acting—if it *is* acting when it is bad—may pass in a prose play—even *fit* ; never in blank verse.

To have beautiful words to speak, whether in prose or verse, must be an aid to acting—if they do not cloud the thought. Most writers of verse are so obsessed with the beauty of form in expression that the thought moves sluggishly.

Shakespeare avoids this—generally. He breaks up the verse into short vital sentences (see *Hamlet*, scenes 1 and 3, Act I. *Macbeth* Act II) that are full of life and movement : if he moralises the rapid change of thought and evolution of idea afford scope for facial acting. His prose is often as poetical as his most beautiful verse ; there is no finer poetry in the language than “ What a piece of work is Man ! ”



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Shakespeare never loses virility by employing verse form ; all others I have read sacrifice it entirely on occasion.

You speak of the “rhythmical *crescendo*” of verse as an aid to effect ; but what of the rhythmical *crescendo* of prose ? Consider : “Hath not a Jew eyes ?”

The love duets of Romeo and Juliet and of Lorenzo and Jessica owe their beauty to their form ; the poetic imagery of the thoughts demand expression in verse and could not have been so exquisitely tender and delicately passionate in prose.

The dramatic effect—suspension in the emotional atmosphere—of the sudden change to prose as the Clerk reads Bellario’s letter is a masterstroke of technique and independent of the acting.

The genius in Marc Antony’s Oration is magnified by the author’s dexterity in having written Brutus’ oration, that precedes it, in prose.

Shakespeare can be just as pithy or humorous in verse as in prose, and, though he usually turns on prose for broad comedy, he can also accomplish it in verse as for example :—

“I see a voice now will I to the chink

“To spy an I can hear my Thisbe’s face.”

But I am answering more than your question, which needed but the one word : Neither.

If proof of our favourite author’s extraordinary genius were required—which it isn’t—I could offer you a curious one. This preamble is merely excuse for telling you the following :—

During the War I was giving some Readings to Blinded Soldiers and I chose The Trial Scene and Act V of *Othello* ; of the familiar scenes I thought that probably they could be visualised more easily than most.

*The Merchant* went off well, Shylock got his laughs and his

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thrills, but without his face the scene is Portia's entirely. Shylock was almost a figure of fun in their imagination and they thoroughly enjoyed his discomfiture. I don't doubt that this is the way Elizabethan audiences took him. Well, the more heartily they laughed the greater was Burbage's triumph in his silent exit.

But *Othello* held them as in a vice. There was that wonderful sympathetic pause at the end that shows how an audience is gripped—and who could listen to the words of that last speech without choking?—they choked and then cheered.

But observe this, for here is my point ; when I was supposed to wound Iago, as I lunged with an imaginary sword I stamped my foot—ever so lightly, but I stamped. And from the blind men came a startled “ Oh ! ” which condemned me instantly for an inartistic bungler ; I should have left it to Shakespeare ; he was holding their imagination ; they knew Iago was bleeding without my clumsy realism.

Of the new plays produced, or about to be, *Daddies*—last night—at the Haymarket will be a huge success—of slush ! *The Voice from the Minaret* is good enough, with the Press's usual boom for Marie Löhr—and it is the only serious play in London, but Marie Löhr as *grande amoureuse* ! *Jack O' Jingles* : did I not say that there is always a public for a reasonably interesting Romantic Drama ? It was a great idea to put Lilian Braithwaite into the lead ; that also ensures a good Press. *Home and Beauty* will run a year. I long to see it. I prophesy a great boom for *The Bird of Paradise* ; it will be too expensive and elaborate to damn in these times. The Musical plays are all safe.

Yours equably,

P.S.—Chris has fixed her first leading part.

## LETTER XXXIX

Hastings

16th September, 1919.

Behold me on the sea-shore !

I feared I was to miss its breezes this year but my fate is better.

I came here for a consultation, but the parent refuses to accept my diagnosis of the off-spring's condition so the patient will survive or languish without my ministration and I retire, baffled, and as gracefully as may be.

Does Harley Street exact a fee when its counsel is repudiated ? I don't know ; but " no play—no pay " is an old playhouse rule, as just as dignified.

On what grounds should we claim payment for what we have not done ? We are not bricklayers.

My author and I have differed, shaken hands and parted. I remain here for a few days if the sun continues to shine.

But the case may interest you : I told you of the Powder play I was called upon to doctor. I regard it as in parlous condition, conscious of malady yet unable to locate its ill. The system, indeed, is so diseased that the ill is omnipartial. It will die of a quotidian if it survive the first ague, for nightly it will blow hot and cold if it come to birth. The author regrets having consulted me. He is of those, I fear, who will accept no opinion that does not confirm his own. The fact is, as I assured him, he has been altogether too heavy-handed, over-anxious to impress, the theme being essentially comedy needs not only the ingenuity of the spider but his deftness in spinning threads. You shall judge.

A girl in man's attire—never mind why—goes to meet



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her lover at a posting-house on the Bath Road and there encounters, in place of him, a highwayman.

Now is it possible to treat this situation gravely?—especially in the costume of 1760. There are two periods—and I know of no other—when it is conceivable that one may fail for two moments to detect the sex of the breeches-wearer; and they are, roughly speaking, the reigns of King Charles the First and of Queen Anne. But if it be apparent at a glance that we are dealing with a male impersonation there is no hope of treating the scene in serious vein—at least, that is my contention. My author quoted Portia but could not move me and on that we split. I did not fail to warn him of what he might expect from his leading actress. Dress even the most experienced in manly garb and she is apt to lose nicety in her sense of proportion and may fail to resist indulgence in the antics of the amateur.

I cited the case of a play I saw not so many years ago at Wyndham's Theatre. The period was 1690, about: a Jacobite story. The girl, a country squire's daughter, was supposed to don a cast-off suit of her younger brother's and ride across country, hell-for-leather, to warn the Prince of Orange of the plot. You would expect to see her in heavy boots and spurs; over-large fustian coat, worn, stained and perhaps even torn; loose neck-cloth and baggy breeches, carrying a heavy hunting-crop and with an old hat jammed on anyhow, which, when it was pulled off, allowed her hair to tousle on her shoulders as she stood with down-cast eyes blushing and smiling before the Prince.

Not a bit of it! The leading lady wore pale blue silk embroidered with silver, the boots of a Principal Boy and

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swaggered up to William carelessly swinging a jewelled switch.

Some people go on their knees and beg for trouble. She got it and, as a result, so did the author and his play. I remember now that it was called *The Sword of the King*. Charles Fulton was William of Orange and acted most excellently as he always did.

I went this morning to listen to the admirable orchestra of Norfolk Megone and incidentally to watch the crowd. The parade was as black as the good Mason's kitchen fly-catcher—and what a crowd! I searched in vain for some single person with the touch of distinction either in bearing or costume. Mr. Smillie's friends abounded. There was a time when they favoured preferentially Margate and Yarmouth and the Hastings crowd had more refinement; but I gather the gentles who still remain are unable in these sordid times to afford the luxury of sea-breezes; even the once aristocratic Weymouth and Bournemouth are now invested—and infested—by Mr. Smillie.

In a corner near the band-stand sat a little figure crocheting, a thin wan face behind huge spectacles, and I recognised in her the last of the once celebrated Rosa Troup of acrobatic dancers who made a great hit at the Alhambra when I was in my teens. The small shrivelled form struck me as pathetic despite the fact that on the fingers were many diamond rings.

As I wandered towards the Old Town, remembering many walks to Ecclesbourne and Fairlight—how many years ago!—We used to leave our overcoats at a little Tavern off the Market and, fortified with a mug of old ale to keep out the cold, sally forth to climb East Hill in any weather—I have done it in a foot of snow—then back to the

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Tavern for our coats ; another mug (to keep the warmth *in*), and so back to lodgings.

Where was I ? Oh, half way to that well-remembered Tavern, whose closed doors mock our boasted freedom.

Well, there lies the stranded submarine that you have read of in the papers. I had no idea the things were so huge. It must have been a mighty gale that whipped the sea to washing it up. But seas were always obstreperous at Hastings. I have seen all Robertson Street—fashionable Robertson Street, it then was—under umbrellas on a clear, bright morning as protection from the spray as the swell split on the sea-wall and splashed over the house-tops in between.

Semadini's was in a narrow turning off Robertson Street—and is now. Ah, me, the cream-buns I have there absorbed ! and cones of sticky pink and white sweet-meat, whose aspect now appals me—only less than Blackpool Rock—but the good Semadini's chocolate was always of the best—as it still is.

The Canadians have not carried with them many regrets for their departure. They would seem to have sacked the Palace Hotel where they were quartered, even as the enemy might. I remember it, before rebuilding to its proud pre-war proportions, as the most cosy and home-like of hostelries—the Sea View Hotel. I stayed there with my Father just before his last long illness. He was a man of better patience and braver hope, Redgie, than any I have known.

Patience that is granted, I believe, only as consolation to those destined to suffer.

Hope, the one compensation of Age, for Youth doesn't hope—it just takes what it wants—or misses it.



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When Youth passes and the misses multiply and hurt  
comes Hope to help us bear the pain.

Take all you want, Redgie, while you can get it.

Yours continually,

## LETTER XL

Hastings

20th September, 1919.

Still here, you see, and most glad to have your letter—and the magazine *Drama*, of which I have read every syllable.

This Drama League, as I understand, aims at inducing everyone to act in an amateur way and at encouraging the composition and production of a true-to-life kind of entertainment that has no relation whatever to Drama properly so-called. It also wishes to apply the method of natural—or unskilled—interpretation to the classics and Owen Nares—if he fulfils my expectation—will be their ideal Hamlet. Not that Nares is an unskilled actor; but he has no skill in classical work. I know, for I saw him as Prince Hal.

To these people Tragedy is an outworn tradition, antiquated and ludicrous. Because they know that their fathers, brothers and cousins went “over the top” with “Cheerio, old bean!” they consider any display of emotion as almost indecent and certainly laughable.

Moreover, as many of the other sex were brides in April, widows in June and brides again in October they regard Imogen as a fool and Juliet as a lunatic.

You say you have seen amateurs act far better than many professionals.

“A hit, a very palpable hit.” I am reluctantly forced to admit—so have I.

Why is it that *anyone* can act and be thought “not so bad,” whereas the violinist who performed as execrably as I saw a man do at the Gaiety Theatre here last night or the painter who laid on his colour as vilely as the same man

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will to-night would fail to win toleration for a single moment?

And you quote the Leading Lady of whom I told you in my last as an example of the utter wrongness of some professional work.

Again : " A touch, a touch, I do confess." My admission above confirms you.

But the explanation is quite simple : many who have the acting instinct are wise enough not to venture in so precarious a profession ; many who have not that instinct are attracted by the glamour of a calling for which they have no qualification. There is no avoiding this unless and until we have an institution like the French *Conservatoire* that examines and refuses diplomas to the unsuitable.

Not that the lady I referred to was incompetent. I had seen her do brilliant work, but in the particular case she lost her sense of proportion. You might have expected it from an amateur, who is likely to neglect to weigh the effect of one character against another—to keep fluid, so to speak, that he may blend with his fellow actors. This is a technical matter that comes only by training ; neglected each character will, as it were, hang as a picture on a wall when spacing is wide and mounts are over-large.

But here is my point about actors and amateurs and the root of my objection to Drama League aims :—Brown, let us say, is a bad actor ; that is, he may entirely fail to satisfy you by his performances, but still there is no doubt *he is an actor*. He can give you credible impersonations, for example, of both Benedick and Dogberry ; he will wear the costumes as though he lived in them as his every-day habit ; he will look like the persons he presents because he is skilled in the art of make-up ; he will speak and bear



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

himself conformably to each character. That you disapprove his readings or deny the discretion of the effects he chooses to make does not alter the fact that he has acquired and does display the technical qualities of the Art he professes.

Now turn to the amateur. You have seen him as Sir Christopher Deering, let us suppose, and you thought him fine—perfect—the very man! I choose Sir Christopher as my example because *The Liars* is the sort of play in which I have myself seen the amateur excel so that his admiring friends exclaimed “You really *must* go on the stage!” He is, in fact, excellent; not Wyndham, of course, one doesn’t expect that, but easy, natural, missing no point: he might well be in his own drawing room. Jones has written the play with such skill that suavity and the natural bearing of a gentleman is all he asks of Sir Christopher’s interpreter. Now cast this amateur as Sir Toby Belch and see what happens. The suave medical, surveying or stock-broking manner is a useless asset; the costume hampers him; the diction worries, he intones or recites the lines and interprets nothing; he has never studied or particularly observed the effects of drunkenness so that his attempts to portray the gentleman who is “soaked” result in an unconvincing display that is certainly not a picture of a gentleman in his cups—let alone a gentleman of the Sixteenth Century—if even any recognisable type of gentleman. The amateur is shown up, not as a bad actor, but as the mere dilettante he is, utterly ignorant of the first principles of the technique of acting. His Sir Christopher was a happy accident. And I dare say you would be surprised if you knew what a number of such accidents happen on the Stage and manage to get away with it by carefully avoiding any engagement that might call for acting of any sort.

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You say that surely expert dramatic criticism should be a guide and corrective of such evils. But too often the criticisms in the Press are mere reporting and a question arises as to whether it has any legitimate place in the columns of a daily newspaper whose readers, in the main, are not in the least interested in the Theatre—certainly not to the extent of being concerned with its artistic aspirations.

Very often criticism—I mean that written by so-called experts—amounts to just this: I hate your handsaw because it is neither a hawk nor a heron. In other words, the author, who for months has been at great pains to state his case, is told that if he had chosen a different case and stated it differently the result might have been—well, different! Rarely indeed do you read criticism that gives credit—or discredit—for what a play *is* rather than what it might be and is *not*. They abuse cabinet-makers for not being gardeners and masons because they are not greengrocers.

A play's first object is to amuse; if it also instruct so much the better; if, in addition to both, it provoke any real depth of thought—exemplify an eternal truth, then it will live. But an ephemeral play may have a very real value; and, if it be a good acting vehicle also, it deserves to be criticised for what it is—not abused for what it does not pretend to be.

All this applies equally to criticism of acting, which is often just as unfairly—or it may be thoughtlessly—written. There are some writers who appear to detest the Theatre and all that pertains thereto and gratify their spleen by indulging in personalities gross and impertinent. The fact is the fully qualified dramatic critic would be an expert playwright who did not compete in the play-market and



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also an accomplished actor who had not given up acting because he had failed at it.

To be of real value I think a critique should have a recognised form from which it should be anathema for any critic to depart, while allowing him all possible scope within its limitations—naturally this does not apply to A. B. Walkley's delightful essays in *The Times*, nothing must be allowed to interfere with them. It should have three parts : (a) the subject matter of the play with analysis of the technical errors or perfections in its treatment (b) analysis of the actors' work with regard to the whole and the parts (c) analysis of the effect of the whole upon the public—the mass and the expert.

But some critics are solely concerned with advertising their own personalities and use the play as their vehicle, as Shaw did when he contributed his series to *The Saturday Review*. No one could regard those articles as serious dramatic criticism though they made one of the cleverest booms I can remember. Shaw has many of the characteristics of the late Mr. Barnum and he owes the foundation of his fortune to the drum-beating instinct which he shared with the defunct and lamented Phineas.

No journalist since has quite rivalled that effort though many are still striving.

To-day all such articles are signed or initialled ; “to my mind ” one reads as prelude to many an inexperienced verdict. There was more dignity in the authority and mystery shrouded by the old-fashioned editorial “We.” O.P.Q. may hide the identity of anybody—who may be nobody.



## LETTER XLI

London

30th September, 1919.

It reminds me of Derby Day !

The old-fashioned Derby Day as I remember it in the Wandsworth Road but without the white hats decorated with Dutch dolls and the grass-green puggarees.

Everything going one way : four-in-hands, phaetons, barouches, landaus, Victorias, dog-carts, donkey-carts, velocipedes—Have you ever seen the old-fashioned velocipede with its front wheel four feet in diameter, Redgie ? I saw more than one of them to-day at Albert Gate.

A big crowd, a jolly crowd ; women, men, girls and boys, all marching East-ward ! Mr. Smillie has his pistol at our head and so perforce we must walk to town. Fortunately it was a fine day, and the novel experience amused. It was a bit of a drag for many of the old ones and those in bad health and the crippled whose bread depends upon their office-jobs. Mr. Smillie has much to answer for—even to his own poor dupes, whose savings must be sorely taxed to gratify his whim.

The Government must win if it stand firm and it will be more than wise in this event to do so, for here is a chance to win back much of the respect it has forfeited in the past months.

Lloyd George may once more interview the Strike leaders and when they have stated their terms say : “How moderate ! Of course we will give you that.” His simple formula, you know, for settling trade disputes. Brilliant, isn’t it ? But he’ll miss a great chance if he uses it this time and I don’t think he’ll dare. Public opinion is really roused.

The motor-buses and trams strike in sympathy so traffic

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is almost at a standstill. Hyde Park is closed ; it has become a vast Exchange for the distribution of milk.

You should not feel it much in your town, for it must end before it pinches but I'm glad you're out of London which will be an angry City after about ten days of this. To-day it is a joke ; soon there will be hunger and backs will begin to stiffen.

It may be useless to post this, but I write on chance. I had yours this morning. Trains are running on the District Railway manned by volunteers ; soon there will be limited service to all the big Centres. As it had to be it is well to get it over and prove to this gang that blackmail of the community can be dealt with by precisely the same method as blackmail of the individual and that, though no mob is more easily cajoled than the citizens of London who will even submit to a certain amount of bullying, they are yet capable, when they become conscious of tyrannical interference with their liberties, of extremely disagreeable reprisals.

The bait to lure the strikers is the impossible socialistic ideal of Equality, towards which the first step is Nationalization of all Public works ! Destructive fallacy ! But towards this end the Mr. Smillies, who know well that the poor gulls could never be their equals in any sense but knavishness, egg them on—to exploit them—to grind them, as in the result they would, for there is no mill-stone so relentlessly cruel as Democracy.

And for this reason : Democracy confers equal rights of citizenship on *all*. Note the important word, "equal." Now if there be one fact that is patent to every thinking creature it surely is that all men are *un*-equal. An acute observer will find the points of difference even in the

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-ONE

Terry Twins ; indeed, any biologist will confirm the fact that no two of us are alike even physically ; how “ much more therefore,” as dear old Euclid says, do we differ intellectually ? How many per cent. of the population do you suppose, are capable, unaided, of forming a logical opinion upon any given subject, an opinion which they can sustain with five minutes’ reasoned argument, *keeping to the point*. Ninety per cent. of those who *can* form an opinion will shift from the general to the personal in defence of it under two minutes. What follows ? Why, that the majority have their opinions found for them. Only a very small percentage of those who make it their profession to find opinions for others are altruist ; the rest are the Axe-grinders and the Envious. In the result Democracy, nice as it sounds—“ by the people for the people ! ” Oh, very pretty !—really amounts to government by the Axe-grinders and the Envious.

The procedure is simple : you set up a figure-head behind which you may travesty in case you over-reach yourselves and then you start : you persuade your dupes to elect you as their representatives and vote yourselves salaries for obliging them ; you select a Cabinet of yourselves to whom you allot exorbitant retaining fees, keeping a tight hold on all financial strings, bull and bear the world markets and quadruple your incomes by every rumour ; you institute Ministries with thousands of officials to make an imposing show for your own glorification and also to convince the gulls that their money is really being spent—in part—in their own Country. You boast that your system is economical though it stifles individual enterprise by destroying competition which is the life-blood of efficiency ; you protect the foreigner in your own markets, penalise the



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

employer and subsidise the unemployable ; you strangle the Services—except the Civil Service—and encourage the mendicant alien to settle in your midst that he may promote social gangrene, both physical and mental.

Every Office is for sale for a Democracy has no standards but Expedience and Compromise ; as none is better than another it follows that the best must sink to the level of the worst, for all levelling is inevitably levelling *down* ! The mountain may crumble on to the plain ; the plain can never rise to the mountain-top.

And thus is society divided into two classes ; the Knaves and the Dupes—the Squeezers and the Squeezed, and government is by a conspiracy of officials whose sole aim is to augment their stipend, no matter by what practice of corruption. Is it to be supposed that the Dupes will be better off—work less and earn more—than under what they now revile as the Capitalist System ?

Quite the reverse. Nothing but envy blinds them to its overwhelming advantages to themselves.

In place of the coal-owner—mine-owner—railway company, each held in check by the competition of other owners and companies, they would have the Monopoly State, organized to grind the ultimate decimal from their sweat to moisten the slakeless maw of its officialdom.

None will produce anything. All will strive to become official and share the plunder.

Bankruptcy !

Then Germany, recuperated while we have squabbled, walks in and seizes the State. We have behaved too grudgingly to France to expect her to exert herself again as a buffer. So the Hun enjoys his carefully planned revenge. For make no mistake, it is he who has worked the whole

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thing through his diabolical invention Bolshevism, financed by the loot from Russia, whom he has destroyed by his agents Trotsky and Lenin.

I wish I had control of the enormous wealth which I believe now lies hidden in Berlin, the proceeds of the pillaging of Russia.

It has been said that Man forgets culture when he is hungry. Is culture, then, merely a veneer? Are manners no more ingrain than the antics of a performing ape? Is respect for law mere dread of police? Is my purse—my house—my field only sacred to me because there are prisons at Brixton and Pentonville and Portland looms behind them?

These men who refuse to work are robbing me as deliberately as though they snatched my tie-pin or my pocket-book.

It is pretended that they suffer in forfeiting their wages, but that is merely pretence; they know their dole is secure to them at my expense and yours. In reality they are practising blackmail, which if it succeed is theft.

But the time must come when a more enlightened—or more honest—group of politicians will insist that they give some return in labour for the dole. Obviously the demagogue prefers to keep them in a state of subjection—and dejection—for he knows that with the incentive of honest work the natural independence of the Englishman will assert itself and he will lose his influence.

The agitator approves the dole because he knows it for an unwholesome drug that is demoralising Labour, rendering it the easier prey for his exploitation—creating a mental appetite that may the more readily assimilate the subversive propaganda with which he dopes it.

He points to lamentable housing conditions, wilfully

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

ignoring the fact that the squalor in which many of his victims exist is of their own making—that it is of their deliberate choice, since they abstain from any effort to improve it. Communism is delighted to perpetuate these evidences of alleged oppression—fosters them as nourishment for Class-hatred.

In my time I have seen much of slum life ; I used to go slumming with Henry Pettitt the dramatist, who found many of his best ideas for character in labarinthine back-alleys.

Were you to transport the dregs of some Lancashire town to Mayfair, in a year they would make Curzon Street as scrofulous as their present abode. It is the unclean people who make slums, not slums that make people unclean.

The morality of preferential treatment for the Unemployable and the Shirker is a large question. Communism clamours for such preference.

Is it ethical to “ treat ” them at the expense of the Industrious and the Thrifty ?

I have never heard convincing argument in support of the affirmative.

I am well aware that my views are what are called reactionary. It does not disturb me in the least. The whole fabric of civilisation is based upon respect for the right of the individual to control what is legitimately his own : the work of his hands and brain (*not* undertaken under contract with another) the fruit of his work obtained by purchase and the gift of relative or friend whether granted directly or by legacy. What he disburses voluntarily—that is to say under the vote of his elected representative—towards the maintenance of the State is a just contribution ; but what is filched from him by a majority of votes, lawyer-



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jockeyed in the interest of venal leaders who pander to a clamorous and corrupt minority, is fraudulently obtained.

To plunder him more effectually two subversive measures were invented ; the 'Trades' Union Act and the Payment of Members Act. Until these Acts are modified or repealed hope of freedom for him is vain.

The evils that were initiated in granting salaries to Members of Parliament can only result in the generation of cancerous ulcer in the body politic. Receipt of payment must bias the judgment of whomever is dependent upon others' favour either for advancement or merely for the continuance of such payment. Independent decision is no longer possible. Thus Members, in place of retaining their dignity as representatives, surrender their wills to Party leaders.

Trades' Unionism is a political conspiracy in which cowardly politicians have connived, thus placing a lethal weapon in the dangerous hand of the primitive brute Labour to menace the class whom they, the politicians, were sworn to represent and protect : the great majority, at present inert—the milch-cow—the golden-egg-laying goose—the backbone of the Country—the Middle Class.

By conceding it our legislators scandalously betrayed their trust.

The reckless waste of money—wrung, in the main, from the Middle Class—upon schemes for educating the ineducable, the class who live in envy of the hard-won amenities their mulcted benefactors enjoy, is the crying injustice of the Age.

The alleged purposes for which Trades' Unionism was legalised are mythical. Labour suffered no ill that our Law Courts could not remedy—no form of sweating or injustice that was not matter for the Police.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Heaven forbid that I should ever assert—even on an impulse—that the minority is in the wrong *because* it is a minority. It has its rights, no less sacred than those of the majority and often much more logical. But to place a bludgeon in the hands of a minority who cannot think for themselves, who are led by Self-seekers—often by Active Enemies of the State—is a danger that must lead to *débâcle* and ultimately to dissolution.

Remedies ?

Let it be taught, expounded, preached throughout the Land that a People who have lost Veneration—who respect nothing—neither God, their fellow-Man nor themselves—themselves are lost !

Veneration is the touchstone of Civilisation.

Equality may be of the spirit never of the flesh.

I know these are Truths. I am by no means sure that you or anyone else will recognise them.

## LETTER XLII

London

10th October, 1919.

Have you ever felt when making a new acquaintance that whatever view that person might take of whatever subject you must disagree solely because he took it?—not from sheer perversity, but from a feeling of panic-stricken repugnance that that particular person should see the thing as you do.

Marie gave me tea and in her lounge I found such a person, a Miss D——, not known to you, I gathered, but one whom Marie had met at the theatre. I know her kind well and sedulously avoid it. It takes a disproportionate interest in other peoples' affairs; it is over-confident in its own accomplishment, over-critical of its neighbours' and offensively patronizing.

The Princess certainly scintillates as a hostess, her tact is unrivalled, she knows exactly how far to encourage each guest and with her intuitive sense always manages to launch subjects of conversation appropriate to their individualities.

I was glad to hear that the object of her flying visit to town was in some degree accomplished. The Manager did keep the appointment; but Marie is a person who is treated with proper deference, she arrogates it—without arrogance.

The engagement is not settled, of course. When is an engagement ever settled without yards of preliminaries and so many delays that any pleasure in the settlement is entirely discounted? However I hope it will be settled; it is ideal for her needs. A man who was of the party is already engaged for the Company. He is an old acquaint-



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

ance of mine and an admirable actor of certain parts, but, like myself, should never be asked to wear modern clothes on the stage. We were playing together once in a modern play and he was cast for an exquisite. The author was not at all pleased with him at rehearsal and in a discussion I had with him, the author, afterwards—I as producer was trying to smoothe matters—"The part," I said, "is like an exotic flower which the others, being themselves cabbages, resent and kill." "Quite so," rejoined the author, "but X makes him a spring onion."

It is an actor's job to do as he is told—at least to be able to do it—and argue with the producer after, if he must. But he should be able to create the same effect by his own method if he can't or won't do the thing the way the co-ordinator of the whole designs. But actors too often regard their individual part as greater than the whole play. This is a disastrous attitude, even though the part be Hamlet.

What a boon it might be to actors who love their work and to authors who are striving to improve their technique if they were allowed in the stalls at rehearsals, as one may listen in the Law Courts—at one time a favourite occupation of mine. Obviously it is impossible. An actor of any sensitiveness could never rehearse before an audience—and such a one! Good heavens, how awful. Poor actors and poor author; how they would be flayed and scarified by their *confrères*. No, that's not an affectation, there is no English for it that I know: comrades they are not, nor colleagues, but just members of the same fraternity. And how the producer—some producers—would show off! Imagine poor old Tree in such a case: how he would have posed and with what quips and quiddities he would have quiddled!

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No, it would never work as long as human nature is as it is and I see no signs of it changing to a kindlier sense.

But Marie's tea-party—Informal tea is delightful but Tea as a function——Well, no doubt it is part of a girl's duty in life but to me it is purely penitentiary ; I suppose because I always sit tongue-tied, an attitude I detest.

The rites of Tea do not encourage conviviality. Woman presides in both senses : she sits before and above and her afternoon's shopping is the primary subject of discussion. I try to take an intelligent interest in *foularde* and *georgette*, *passementerie* and accordion-pleating, but no one would pretend that I shine.

Conversation meanders towards Art, the modern feminine aspect of Art. Miss D——— is, of course, an ardent Drama Leaguer. The moment inevitably arrives when, having seethed inwardly to boiling point, I burst—something flies and I commit a social solecism.

You have called me unsociable and no doubt you are right ; I am certainly unsocial. Friendship is too sacred a thing to bandy about and exchange with Tom or Dick, Jane or Harriet. The world does not love those who smile ; but the beastly time-server and hypocrite cringes to them because he believes that seeming happiness is positive indication of the possession of wealth, before which he is ever ready to prostrate ; his sordid soul can't realise that the one is possible without the other. Love and Friendship should not be cheapened by a too promiscuous outpouring though Courtesy and Kindliness may be allowed to flow without a spigot.

Marie, knowing my weakness, fed me with cream cakes and cleverly enmeshed X in the web of Miss D———'s

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

fascination. I must admit to enjoying a certain malicious satisfaction in watching the squirming of poor X whose artistic pride is extremely sensitive and who suffers the feminine weakness of invariably applying generalities to himself. If he hears it remarked that Godfrey Tearle or Henry Ainley is the best looking man on the Stage he takes it as a personal affront.

But it was the lady—with whom I hope always to exist in cordial disagreement—who most interested me. I looked at her and I looked at Marie. Marie powders her nose. I wish she didn't. Powder is the thin end of the wedge that thickens to rouged cheeks and bulks large in blackened eyebrows and farded lips. No one reasonably objects to powder *quâ* powder—though I prefer some noses shiney—but to what of deception it suggests. But when I turn from contemplation of that adventitious bloom so delicately applied to face the stark nakedness of Miss D——'s olfactory organ conviction staggers and performs *volte-face*. If we abandon our theories it is that experience proves them cataractic.

Miss D—— scorns all forms of pretence ; she is of that aggressive clan called “downright” and goes in bare-faced indecency advertising on her countenance the bias of her outlook. I don't mean that she squints physically but her mental squint is of the most oblique. No, she doesn't squint, she has the unemotional, calculating, cruel eye of the German.

I try always to keep off the subject of the Drama in mixed company or when the party includes Moderns, for I know they regard me as a very grumpy Old Pro. because I can pretend only a minimum of interest in the kind of play they think the only kind ; and the acting they rave about as



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“sweet” (for the male) and “dinky” (for the female) infuriates me to the point of rabidity.

But after all the positiveness of inexperience is the only true wisdom. It is when we begin to entertain the idea that perhaps the other fellow may be right that our troubles and difficulties begin.

But on these occasions it is well to remember that the virtue of modesty has grave disadvantages. True that self-praise is not accepted as good evidence, but equally true that self-depreciation is generally considered very reliable evidence indeed. One is valued always at one's lowest estimate of oneself; the studiously modest invariably gets left.

We talked of *Reparation* and of *The Lost Leader* at the Court and all found much to praise in the admirable first Act of the latter. I had to admit—for I was eventually drawn into the discussion—that I could not accept Norman McKinnel as the embodiment of Parnell. I have always thought of Parnell as a sympathetic person and McKinnel in any part that is not, at least, sinister is—well, in my opinion, unsuited.

McKinnel's case is similar to that of that very brilliant actor Charles Cartwright, who never failed, until, under his own management, he insisted on playing the hero. His hard-set jaw and voice like a steel file dipped in vinegar rasping on the uneven teeth of a blunted saw were incapable of stirring sympathetic emotion. I once saw him play Pierre in *The Two Orphans*—May he and the Manager who cast him for the part be forgiven!

But Cartwright was a fine actor. There were three great scenes of acting in an indifferent play at the Adelphi called *In the Days of the Duke* and two of them we owed

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

to Cartwright. In the more impressive he had the invaluable co-operation of Marion Terry. The third gave us one of the best exhibitions of swordsmanship I have ever seen—by Terriss and Beveridge.

Talk about Reserved Force!—which is generally all reserve and no force—in the scene I recall Cartwright was like a quick volcano—Etna with its bowl brimming with molten lava, seething, swelling, rippling, bubbling and yet not overflowing; eruption imminent but never bursting—his voice never raised above a whisper, but the muscles of his throat and jaw quivering, his humid temple throbbing—as Kean's when he played Sir Edward Mortimer in Colman's adaptation of Godwin's *Caleb Williams*.\*

And Marion Terry pleading to the man who worshipped her, who had killed her husband in jealousy and now held her son's life in his hands. It sounds commonplace, but these two exceptional actors lifted it to the highest plane of emotional expression.

And Cartwright was an admirable comedian too, as I remember well in *The Bells of Haslemere*, for his villain was a jaunty and amusing H. J. Byronesque *chevalier d'industrie* in the earlier acts. But I saw him as Dan'l Peggotty—No!

In *Helen with the High Hand* McKinnel gave an admirable study of a curmudgeon in the grimly comic vein. But I saw him as King Lear—

The lack of sympathy in the leading character—I speak now of *The Lost Leader*—so disturbed the play that I could not judge it, but I doubt it would have held anyhow after Act I which did seem to promise a vital interest and was admirably acted by Miles Malleeson.

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\* The Iron Chest.

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-TWO

My visit to the St. James' provoked other and very sad reflections. It was one of the few houses that preserved in its atmosphere the dignity of the Theatre ; it was not a garish showbox like so many, all looking-glass, variegated marble and tawdry gilding, but, in common with Drury Lane, Covent Garden, the Haymarket and the Garrick in John Hare's time, it had an air, not of solemnity but of serious intention, which must be the basis of every artistic effort and is surely the fittest setting for it even though its texture be of gossamer.

They have not exactly white-washed the St. James' but the effect is very little different. It is distempered in French grey and upholstered in cherry coloured plush ; a chilling environment.

The curtain rose to discover a room—in French grey of the exact shade and upholstered in the identical cherry.

This is beyond question an artistic mistake. Reinhardt brought the stage into the auditorium ; Stanley Bell carries the auditorium on to the stage. Anything that arrests attention—that distracts—that does not assist the illusion of reality there beyond the footlights must be artistically wrong.

The story of Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse*, upon which *Reparation* is founded, is not inspiring, but it offers a tremendous chance to the actor in the final phase, when Fedya is discovered in the drinking den and dragged back to life.

Oh, the curse of long runs and prosperity ! The night I saw the play—at least so it seemed to me—Ainley did not trouble to act.

I was within a few feet of Ainley on the stage of Drury Lane at the performance of *Julius Cæsar* in celebration of the Shakespeare Tercentenary and I heard Lady Alexander



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

say to him—it was before his first entrance as Antony—“This is the great moment of your career!” (or words to the same effect) and indeed it was an opportunity such as comes to but very few. But Ainley left all the work to Shakespeare; he attempted neither to personate nor—so far as I could judge—to interpret. He only “spoke right on.”

Can it be that I have a totally false conception of Antony as the subtlest of politicians—the most astute of sympathetic hypocrites—the paragon of Arch-Diplomatists?

Antony cannot fail to be interesting as Cæsar’s devoted friend, triumphant by sheer force of dogged honesty, but acted so the part loses its dominance. Moreover study of the text will prove this amiable attitude untenable.

Why did Shakespeare in this play dwell upon Cæsar’s “thrasonical brag”—insist upon his infirmities and draw him as a superstitious fool? Do you suppose he knew no better? The answer to that you will find in *Hamlet*—“the mightiest Cæsar”—and in *Richard the Third*—“Death makes no conquest of this conqueror.” He had a purpose, he had always a purpose, and in this case it was not merely to fortify Brutus.

The subject is interesting. Think it out, Redgie, and write to me of your conclusions.

Yours,

## LETTER XLIII

London

12th October, 1919.

Since I wrote to you last poor H. B. Irving has passed—four days ago—after long illness, I believe. I did not know him well, I think few people did; he was singularly inaccessible except to his intimates, but I found him agreeable in a sort of hearty way—that wasn't from the heart—which was his managerial pose for those who were not under his management. He had none of that unaffected frankness of his brother Laurence.

But what is to be said of him as an actor?

This first, I think, that but for his father's name and fame he would never have abandoned the studies that more forcefully attracted him for the uncertain glory of striving to fill, with rather cold and shrivelled feet—I imagine them like carved ivory—the vacant shoes so very many sizes too large for him.

He had a certain angular facility, polished by long years of practice. Nursed and pampered in Ben Greet's Repertory, he was given every chance to try his flight in all the great leading parts—*forced*, one may say, in the hot-house Opportunity. What part would he choose to try next? He had but to say and the play was put in rehearsal.

And the result—?

I saw him as Hamlet, Iago, in *The Lyons Mail*, *Louis the Eleventh* and his father's old part of Gregory Brewster, as well as in some half dozen modern plays, which he merely strolled through as himself. They didn't matter artistically one way or the other. If you liked H. B. and it amused you to see him do it—well. If you wanted acting—you went elsewhere in search of it.

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There were two exceptions to this in my knowledge : his performance of Beverley in *The Barton Mystery* and his Wilfred Denver. Beverley was a great part and no doubt he modelled his performance upon his father's Jingle or Jeremy Diddler. He created a big effect with it but I could not be quite fair to him, because the great figure stood in my imagination towering over him and dwarfing all his effort.

In *The Silver King* he attempted the impossible ; he strove to modernise the character ; that is to say, to walk through it and let it play itself in the modern fashion. But Wilfred Denver must be taken hold of, characterised and *acted*. True as the story was in 1881—How well I remember seeing the play for the first time in my Christmas holidays—it is untrue in the conditions of to-day. The telephone, electric light, motor-cars, wireless and all that they stand for falsify it. The Wheatsheaf on Derby Day is now an unreal picture. The Spider and his associates quite unconvincing. The silver mine ; the eviction of Nellie ; the simplicity of the village school-children's evening hymn ; the villagers themselves—The modern critic scoffs at the sentiment as unreal. It was real in 1881 and, if the play must be revived (I would prefer it had not been) it is producer's and actors' duty to make it appear real now ; the author alone can't do it. This was not done ; it was not even attempted and the result was misfortune.

H. B. Irving played Iago to the Othello of Lewis Waller and both actors were very simply themselves. Neither can have had, for one moment, the thought of impersonation. If either had the notion of asking himself : What is Iago—or Othello—thinking in this passage ? I should be very surprised. No ; the first idea in both minds must have



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been : What will be most effective for *me* ? And that they did as well as they were able, and effective it proved, as the columns of Press matter about the star-cast testified—for Evelyn Millard was the Desdemona and Edith Wynne Matthison the Emilia. And so the *dossier* was discreetly sealed and placed, very properly, in its pigeon-hole.

Hamlet is every man and H. B. had abundant precedent in making no attempt to personate when he played him. Yet if I tell you of his father's Hamlet and persuade you in any measure to my view you will find in it my criticism of his son's performance.

But I won't do that yet because I want to tell you first something of Charles Kean. He paved the way for Irving in more senses than one.

*Louis the Eleventh* is a rather long-winded play in tedious Alexandrines ; *Le Courrier de Lyon*, a drama in eight tableaux, simply and vigorously written, with a number of fine parts all logically developed ; for example, Choppard is a rich piece of portraiture, which was originally impersonated by the great French actor Paulin-Menier.

Dion Boucicault prepared a version in English of the first for Charles Kean and Charles Reade adapted the second, which was somewhat modified, rearranged and more aptly christened *The Lyons Mail* for Irving. In both cases the originals were mercilessly hacked to create vehicles for the English Star, and the results were their justification.

In *Louis the Eleventh* Charles Kean had the triumph of his career. Both characters were among the finest efforts of Irving, who also used Dion Boucicault's adaptation of *Louis* by the courtesy of Mrs. Charles Kean. But Irving gave no imitation of Kean's performance ; in many ways he contradicted it.

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But H. B. Irving attempted no more than to reproduce his father's performances of both characters and in both instances one glaring fact obtruded, which was in itself criticism of the acting: the painful thinness of the play. The picture was never real, it never filled the stage; the thing was not alive, it had no dimensions.

I am not going to compare the productions scene by scene as I could; they were mere husks without kernels, bodies without souls. As one left the theatre one heard on all sides nothing but regrets that a favourite should appear in such poor stuff—but *no word of his acting!* Could there be more vital condemnation? The only excuse for such vehicles is that the actor should dominate all and make his audience lose sight of his material in their admiration of his art.

I took Chris to see H. B. Irving in *A Story of Waterloo*—there was another play in the programme, so thin that I quite forget it—and I was most interested to note the effect upon her. It is an effective little piece of sentiment and from that point of view it touched her, but she was not for a moment impressed. The thing has no *raison d'être* unless the impersonation of the old Corporal be a *tour de force*. For that reason Irving acted it only after one of his great rôles, such as Mathias, and made his effect as much by contrast as by the minute detail of his observation in the composition of a character so widely different to anything else associated with his name. It was a perfect study of plebian senility, but Gregory Brewster is hardly a worthy medium for a great actor's art.

H. B. was no more than adequate in reproducing his father's business; his father's make-up and clothes did the rest, helped by the little play's reputation.

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Laurence Irving was a far finer actor than his brother : undoubtedly he inherited something of his father's genius—though it developed in different directions. His performance of the Japanese Tokeramo—played in Paris by de Max—was as nearly perfect as anything of the sort I have ever seen. The play suffered by the acting of his wife as the courtesan ; in no sense did she satisfy the requirements of the part. Helène is *la grande amoureuse* at her most alluring and voluptuous ; no mere drab of Brixton could raise such tempest of passion in the breast of the stoic diplomatist that for her he is content to sacrifice his life and his work, his career and his country. The title, *Typhoon*, is positive evidence that this element is essential to the development and I am convinced that it was because this was incredible with Miss Hackney as Helène that the play had no greater success. Such vogue as it did enjoy was tribute to Laurence Irving's masterly performance.

Only once did I see Mabel Hackney justify her position as a Leading Lady—in a play of Brieux's, *Le Hanneton*, which her husband adapted as *The Incubus*. In the title rôle her personality and particular affectations appeared to be identical with those of the character. No doubt she was a charming woman : the tragic circumstances of her death cast a romantic halo around her memory. I never met her, though I knew Laurence well ; but from the stalls I felt always that her personal qualities were small—that she was incapable of any depth of feeling—that no emotion ever reached her heart ; thus it would not be difficult for her to realise the shallow, mean-souled, little scratch-cat that Brieux drew.

It was Laurence Irving's performance in *The Unwritten Law*, which he adapted himself from Dostoievsky's *Crime*



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*and Punishment*, that persuaded me that in him we might find a new Chief. It was curiously uneven—in certain scenes crude and ineffective as the work of the rawest novice, but suddenly he would rise on an inspiration and grip and hold the attention and thrill the house as I have seen no actor do since.

By the way, it was on the occasion of my visit to the Kingsway to see that play that I first heard Rachmaninoff's Prelude. I have not forgotten the impression it made upon me. In my mind it is always since associated with *Macbeth*.

I saw Laurence play Iago to Tree's Othello. I fear he was too concerned in being original to do himself or the part justice. Yet what an opportunity for any Shakespearean actor to play in any play of Shakespeare with Tree!

Laurence had enormous success as the old Marquis in *The Lily*, a performance as individual as his Tokeramo; but it is by his extraordinary promise as Rodion Romanytch that I judge him and by his death I believe the Stage suffered irreparable loss.

Of course we are right about Antony. Act IV Scene 1 settles the question beyond argument. Antony foresaw the storm and had predetermined the part he meant to play in it. He was both soldier and diplomatist, keen, alert, supple, inflexible.

Your analysis of his Servant's excellent *performance* under his instruction in the Murder Scene is admirable. His own acting for the benefit of the Conspirators is a monumental example of diplomatic acuteness—bluff! And this detracts nothing from his real affection for his dead friend, in whom, as Shakespeare has taken pains to draw him, there could be little to admire.

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Affection and admiration are not inseparably linked.

It is strange.

As Oscar Wilde most profoundly said: "Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." So nothing that is worth experiencing can be described. If I would tell you how and where that deeper emotion, of which affection is but the puny shadow, must be rooted I should need a pen more searching and ink more consistent than the flippant fluency of Wilde.

"Beauty needs no explanation," he wrote. He was too guarded. Beauty is *beyond* explanation and as Love is the beauty of the Spirit its explanation lies beyond infinity.

Affection is the tepidity of cousinly kinship.

From this you will deduce that I have been reading *Intentions*. I have also read *De Profundis*. I think of Jack Point and Canio.

He shall share with me the epitaph I have chosen:

*"Rest perturbed spirit."*

I wish you could have seen Hawtrey coruscating as Lord Goring.\* Effortless artistic collaboration in exultant prosperity.

Yours affectionately,

I am so very glad that Marie has settled that engagement. Please give her my heartiest congratulations. I look forward with entire confidence and the happiest anticipation to seeing her play the parts. I imagine you discussing them together and wrangling—most politely—over readings.

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\* *The Ideal Husband*, by Oscar Wilde.

## LETTER XLIV

London

27th October, 1919.

Yes, I read reports on that play by Arthur Shirley on Edmund Kean, produced lately in Manchester. I gather that it owed nothing to the old play by Dumas, first produced in 1837, with Lemaître acting the part of Kean. That play, as I told you, has not one word of historical truth in it; whereas Shirley seems to have founded his play on authenticated facts and indeed the facts alone make very poignant drama.

If ever a human being suffered and by his indomitable will mastered adversity that man was Edmund Kean. He was of obscure parentage and though more than probably Jewish on one side he was descended through his mother from the Marquis of Halifax. His great-grandfather, Henry Carey, was the composer of the National Anthem and of the sweet ballad *Sally in our Alley*. As a small child he did odd jobs at Drury Lane where Miss Tidswell, the only friend of his childhood, was employed as a small part actress. He appeared in the Pantomimes—as a rabbit or other animal—and as a vision in *Macbeth*. As an imp in the Cauldron Scene he once got between Kemble's legs and nearly threw him down; a quarter of a century later he did it more effectively.

Kean learned to dance from Bologna, the celebrated harlequin—to sing from Charles Dibdin—to tumble from the great Grimaldi; he learned to box and fence from observation and perfected himself by practice. He appeared at Richardson's booth in Bartholomew Fair; and broke both ankles in the ring of Saunders' circus. He walked to Portsmouth; "stowed away" on a ship bound for Madeira



## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-FOUR

—was discovered, made Cabin-boy, and, finding the office uncongenial, feigned deafness so that he was discharged as useless—and so cured of the sea.

The accident to which, indirectly, he owed his chance at last was meeting with Doctor Drury, the Master of Harrow, who procured him tuition—probably at Eton (it is uncertain)—for two years when he was just under sixteen.

After that he struggled against every kind of misfortune for ten years. His lack of business ability and quick temper were grave impediments to his progress.

At twenty-one he married Mary Chambers of Waterford (where she had been a school-mistress) who was nine years his senior. The manager of the Gloucester Theatre where both were employed dismissed them in consequence; and for six years they tramped the country with their two children, Howard and Charles. They played in tap-rooms and barns—even by the way-side.

Eventually Kean met Doctor Drury again, who induced Arnold, the acting-manager of Drury Lane, to see Kean act. This filled him with high hope, but disappointment followed for delay succeeded delay.

Meanwhile his favourite, little Howard, died and grief drove him to find solace in drink. This hereditary failing was the ultimate cause of his undoing, but it had in no sense impaired his powers when eventually his great opportunity came.

I have told you how magnificently he took it. Shirley, I understand, avoids the great error of Dumas' play in which (in Act IV) he shows Kean *acting*. This is an artistic mistake for no actor can or even will act as greatly as the author makes his audience feel his character of Kean can act. It is essential to persuade the public of this and their

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imagination can be—and in the play is—convinced of it. But when it comes to the scene in which they actually see it—Well, Lemaître did not do it ; even Kean himself could not have done it.

Do you follow me ? Kean the actor might personate Kean the man on the stage ; but even Kean the actor could not be great enough to superimpose the predicated greatness of Kean the actor upon his stage performance of Kean the man.

It reminds me of the appalling error of making Trilby in the play sing. Du Maurier creates in his readers the certainty that Trilby, under Svengali's hypnotic influence, sang as no human being had ever sung—or could. When, in the play, the actress attempts to realise this one says : “ Delightful ! But Tetrizzini sings better,” and the whole illusion is marred. Trilby's voice must be unearthly in its wonder. So in Dumas' play, if Kean's acting is not above the superlative the effect is inadequate.

When Byron saw Kean as Sir Giles Overreach he had an epileptic fit. The actor who should attempt to show Kean's acting on the stage to-day might give his audience excuse for another kind of fit—of laughter.

From what I have told you of Kean's waywardness don't assume for a moment that there was anything slapdash about his method, ever. He was well educated, fluent, even graceful in his public speaking—presumably impromptu—could write a good letter and hold his own in any society. He studied his parts for years—spent as long as twelve hours at a stretch rehearsing alone before a pier glass. Poor Mary must have had a trying time, for he would make her sit in judgment of his efforts and effects as he rehearsed before her hour after hour. She would seem to have been a very helpful critic.



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His abandonment of the traditional red wig of Shylock was no impulse of the moment, but in keeping with his practice in the new reading of the part which he had given in the provinces for years before he startled London with it at the Lane. He would never "make anything do." From childhood when, at about ten years old, he recited Hamlet, Norval or his favourite Richard, he was always most earnest and precise over readings and details of costume. He was an indefatigable student and an untiring worker.

With all this I do not pretend that he was "nice" in the modern acceptation of the word; he had no parlour tricks, and, I fear, no very good manners; he was the born bohemian artist and it was by his art alone that he conquered.

He must have been more than trying to live with, especially as Mary, after his success, developed a taste for the sweets of social superiority. "Mary shall ride in her carriage," he shouted in the first enthusiasm of his triumph, "and Charlie shall go to Eton;" and he kept his word. But the house in Clarges Street became less attractive to him than the Coal-Hole in the Strand. He loved the society of his equals and had no stomach for patronage.

But still, so far as I can discover, there is no shred of positive evidence to convict him in the Cox Case. Everything supports the theory that he was the victim of a plant. Alderman Cox had had several loans from him; Mrs. Cox was a fascinating and designing woman, who exercised all her allurements to induce the wealthy actor—for he was very wealthy if we compare the value of money to-day with its worth a hundred years ago—to compromise himself. For the sake of the good name of our greatest actor—since Burbage—I wish the Case of Cox v. Kean could be re-tried.



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I don't think the Alderman would win his verdict and walk off with his £800 damages.

The verdict, however, was against Kean and the Public hissed him from the stage, so that he was forced to flee to the United States, where, in some towns, he was similarly treated.

Very few speeches delivered by actors or managers from the stage have ever equalled in simplicity and dignity that which Kean offered his public on his return to Drury Lane. He was reinstated in their favour and again triumphed in their affections : they could find no actor to compare with him.

And his family : how did they welcome him ?

I fear there is little doubt that Mary had become a snob—and Charles a prig.

In Kean's last illness his old friend—his only friend, so it would seem—Miss Tidswell nursed him. It is true that Mary visited him, *in extremis*, in response to his cry : “Mary come home ! ”

The pathetic picture Helen Faucit has left us of the great tragedian, as she met him, when a little girl, near his cottage next the old theatre on Richmond Green where he passed his last years and died, is a sad comment on departed glory. Yet Kean's short reign in absolute supremacy was perhaps a happier consummation than that which any other great actor has enjoyed. Better a sudden eclipse than “to lag superfluous,” forced by economic need to stay in the public eye and suffer the dissipation of dignity in past achievement in the jeers of a new generation whose youthful superiority is always prone to scoff at the ghost of the greatness their fathers revered.

As he was sinking he sobbed out the name of his little

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son Howard. And later as the fever rose: "Give me another horse!"—"Mary, forgive;" and so he passed.

In certain *rôles*—the greatest—"no words can do justice to Kean's acting." It was above criticism; it was Truth. Even in the parts, such as Hamlet, in which he was not uniformly perfect there were flashes of such genius as lifted them above the achievement of all others. "He has the flash of the gem as well as its solid worth."

Would that this great spirit would condescend to "revisit the glimpses of the moon" and make our night—glorious!

And now I have no time to tell you about Charles. Your question carried me back to his father who is so much more interesting.

Yours,

## LETTER XLV

London

17th November, 1919.

I am sending you a copy of No. 1. Vol. 1 of *The Piccadilly Review*. I believe it will amuse you as it has me. But I fear—Oh, I fear! Will it live until Christmas? It hasn't a vulgar allusion or a cretinous double-sense in its pages, yet it is published at threepence. It is written in good English for nice minds, yet its form does not proclaim it a rival of *The Spectator*, *The Saturday Review*, or what *The Athenæum* was. How could it — at the price? There is its great mistake. To-day those who can afford no more than threepence for a luxury cannot afford even so much, and the mob whose cash seems inexhaustible would scorn a mere threepen'orth. More likely, they, to venture half-a-crown and then the matter would bore them. Anyway I shall take it so long as it survives if only for Professor Saintsbury's *Notes on a Cellar Book*. To my mind that article is the most gorgeous bit of simple writing it has been my privilege to read this year.

I take it everybody knows George Saintsbury's *History of English Literature*, a most fascinating volume. I can't pretend to be a student of his writings, and though this book contains much illumination on the Standard Drama I think he finds but little interest in the Theatre, though he once did a critique on Irving's production of *Othello*. I remember a preface to what I thought an indifferent translation of *Splendeur et Misères des Courtisanes* but then Balzac doesn't go well in English. It is here we meet that wonderful scamp the "terrible and mysterious" Vautrin, a character Lemaître played in a dramatisation by Balzac himself. It was not a good play. Balzac was not a very successful



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dramatist, indeed I know of only one good play of his, *La Marâtre*—and what a part that would have been for Mrs. Kendal, or would be now for Miriam Lewes.

His erudition—I have returned to the Professor—is catholic and inexhaustible and his personal charm as profound as his knowledge—though I do not speak from a personal acquaintance. But I met once some University magnates at Aberdeen who fell to talking of him over lunch ; though I fear his wonderful gastronomical *flair*—he is a *gourmet* of the most exquisite—was more the subject of discussion than his literary skill, of which, however, there was—and indeed is—no word more to be said.

We ate very well indeed at that luncheon party, but what is the use of describing a *menu* to you ? For you Brillat-Savarin lived in vain ; you have no more interest in food than a woman, who may pretend she likes it in order to flatter us, but only really notices it when it is bad. She appreciates the *Café de Paris* because she can there exploit Poiret's latest ; her diamonds from Boucheron or Lacloche and her *babioles* of the *Rue de la Paix*, but her gastronomic attitude is an insult to the *chef*.

I don't blush to own that I have a palate of the most sensitive and a capacity of far more accommodation than my contours—or the lack of them—seem to promise. I adore good food but a “cut from the joint and two vegetables” simply appals me. In preference to envisaging that staple dish I would lunch with Sam Isaacs. Harris's Sausages at the Cook-Shop, with onions and “mashed” invites : the joint at Simpson's, even, does not allure me. The last time I was in the *Café de Paris* I invited the *maitre d'hôtel* to prescribe for me. He suggested a steak and an omelette. I rejoined : “I can get that in London. *Je*

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

*suis à Paris pour goûter,*” and thereafter fared excellently every day. But my words were not strictly true. I was in Paris on very different affairs of which I told you when we first met. When, I wonder, shall I behold the *Arc de Triomphe* once more !

I have written no more of the old actors for two reasons ; firstly, I fear to bore you with too much on the subject, and secondly, it is one that on occasions fills me with a great depression. I love the Theatre so that it grieves me more than I can express that what I most loved it for has now passed irrevocably. Who cares now for that grace and dignity of speech and gesture inseparable from the Grand Manner ? Not only is it lost, but even the conception of it is passing. No one under forty has seen even the shadow of it and can only conceive it vaguely.

You may hear plenty of jokes about Vincent Crummles if the Grand Manner is mentioned, and the poor fools who indulge in them imagine themselves mighty clever in discrediting what they call an out-of-date convention, but they forget that to present classic figures modified by the manners of modernity is as heinous as to coat the sculptor’s marble with Aspinall’s enamel. A picture of life as it is under present conventions, when by training and habit we strive to conceal all emotion, can never be Truth. Codes of Manners pass, but elemental emotions are ingrain. To modernize—to colloquialize (as I have said I believe Garrick did) the passions is to falsify them, for they have had the same general expression in all periods.

Those heartfelt and soul-stirring emotions dealt with by the imagination of Shakespeare ignore sublimely the petty forms of individual epoch, forms that are idiosyncratic rather than characteristic of the race.

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Even the type capable of using the Grand Manner is passing. We find proof of this not only in the Theatre but at the Bar, in the Church. Statesmen, doctors, professors want that bearing—that grandeur of personal importance—that stature—that *tournure* that seems to have disappeared with the Victorian age. There was a nobility of brow and chin, almost common, that now you may search for in vain. Such heads were not covered by trilbys. Their figures have passed with the frock coats that were their fitting raiment. It would be impossible for me to picture my Father—or my uncle, who stood six feet four and was symmetrically proportioned—lolling in a lounge suit. The silk hat of civic respectability was as much a part of him as Cæsar's laurel wreath or Napoleon's *chapeau aux bords retroussés*.

Can you picture Macready in a boater?—or Tennyson in a bowler?

Who is there to-day who can arrest attention by his recitation of ten lines of blank verse *for the sake of the verse alone*?

Basil Gill's Brutus is perhaps the nearest we can get to-day to the kind of expression I mean. Dear Basil, who is typical Harris tweed. His Henry the Fourth is sonorous and dignified and he doesn't listen to his voice; the sole example I can recall of an actor with a fine voice who hasn't been ruined as an actor by being told it is fine. But Gill is not a tragic actor. As King Henry he was right enough in the scene with Prince Hal, but with Hotspur in Act One he could not rise to the majesty of his anger. There, perhaps, Mollison was better, though he listened to every word he uttered and seemed all the time to be saying: "Isn't this a magnificent organ?" This fault quite



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spoilt his Pistol which might have been a great performance.

But I am anticipating the conclusions I set out to draw for you. To do that I must continue my brief outlines of the work of our representative actors from the time Shakespeare created our Theatre and for as long as we had a Chief. So, as you ask me, I will go on where I left off when I write again.

But these are anxious days. I must get some kind of work. I am so thankful Chris has something to do and I long to see her in her first leading part though I'm as nervous as a rabbit for fear I may not like her.

Whether I get something or not is just a chance : it is not for a moment a question of ability. Tried and approved favourites — even Stars who have glittered to everyone's satisfaction—are often without work to-day.

Yours,

## LETTER XLVI

London

29th November, 1919.

Writing of Macready's contemporaries and successors, William Archer characterises the following as "lesser men of a degenerate age": Wallack, Phelps, Vandenhoff and Charles Kean.

Of these the first and third are interesting to us only as links of the past. Wallack, who played most of the Juveniles with Macready, was at his best with the Swash-bucklers, being excellent as Petruchio, Mercutio and Benedict. He migrated to the U.S.A. where he became very prosperous as D'Artagnan, Don Cæsar de Bazan *et hoc* and established himself in management at Wallack's Theatre, New York, where he is remembered as The Great Wallack. His son, Lester Wallack, worthily upheld the family tradition.

It is not quite just, I think, to count Wallack as "a lesser man" because he did not aspire to the grand rôles; nor will I agree that the early—and mid—Victorian era was "a degenerate age."

John Vandenhoff was a tragic actor of the Kemble school—the last of any prominence—with all its faults and limitations. Like Kemble, he was much admired as Coriolanus, but it is well to note that they did not use Shakespeare's play but a re-hash by Kemble himself of Shakespeare and a play on the same subject by James Thomson with emendations by one, Wrighton, the prompter of Drury Lane. Vandenhoff was also a celebrated Iago, the one part in which it has been said he showed any trace of humour or humanity. He was the father of Miss Vandenhoff who created Parthenia in Mrs. Lovell's *Ingomar*, the part in

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which the beautiful American actress, Mary Anderson, first captured London at the Lyceum in the early Eighties.

But Phelps and Charles Kean are of the greatest interest to us for they preserve the monarchy of the Stage, if I may say so, in the direct succession.

Not many years ago while playing in Portsmouth I journeyed to the little village of Catherington, about a mile beyond Horndean, and in the burying ground of the little Norman Church of St. Catherine's—which is in itself almost a monument to departed Napiers—I found a stately oblong stone casket commemorating Mary Kean who died in 1849 aged seventy ; Charles Kean her son—and son of the great tragedian—Eleonora his wife, who was a favourite actress as Ellen Tree before she became known to playgoers as Mrs. Charles Kean ; and Patty Chapman, their adopted daughter, who departed as recently as 1912.

Charles Kean made his first appearance at Drury Lane as Young Norval in Home's *Douglas* when he was barely sixteen, and ten years later, in 1837, created a sensation as Hamlet ; but he never fulfilled the high hopes then entertained of him. However, despite certain physical disadvantages—he spoke always as though with a very bad cold in his head, which would have disqualified him for the *Théâtre Français*—he became our representative actor-Manager after the retirement of Macready, managed the Princess' Theatre from 1850 for about ten years and during that time gave most of the standard dramas in addition to many original plays. Under his management the run of a play was first established ; before his time twenty or at most thirty performances in a season of any one play marked it a huge success. *The Lady of Lyons* was repeated thirty times in its first year,



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though—as Macready admitted—for the first ten performances to only “half a Pit.”

Charles Kean would not seem to have been a great actor in the Grand Manner. Of his Macbeth it is said that one had less the feeling of witnessing a combat with Fate than a bull-fight : his Othello was “painstaking but inadequate” ; Shylock was “fairly effective.” As Richard, however, he reproduced all his father’s business, but so well assimilated that it seemed spontaneous and in the result was “more than conventionally good.” But don’t forget that this was not Shakespeare’s but Colley Cibber’s *Richard the Third*. Wolsey was “impressive” ; Romeo had “fine fire” ; but Hamlet remained his solitary outstanding achievement among the great tragic parts, though even of that Matthew Arnold said he “wanted mind,” which to me seems the direct condemnation.

In Comedy Charles Kean was more striking ; his Ford especially was praised for its clever admixture of agitation, perplexity and humour. But where he really excelled to the degree of original genius was in the composition of what are called Character parts—though to my mind every part is that and Hamlet is as much a character part as Touchstone. But the term has a special significance in theatrical jargon. It is used in contradistinction to Straight parts, which include many that are by no means straight ; for example : all the Leads in Tragedy are called Straight. Of a new Shylock it might be asked : “does he play it Straight or Character ?” meaning, does the actor rely for his effect on his own personality and delivery in the *ore rotundo* or does he personate the character as he conceives it, varying pace and inflection to give it humanity and adopting pose and gesture consonant with

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

such conception ? The first method though dependent almost entirely on natural gifts was certainly better thought of than the more human rendering.

But the term Character is generally applied to such parts as Charles Kean made very strikingly his own, they were : Mephistopheles, the hero of *Pauline* (whose name I forget), the Corsican Brothers, and especially King Louis the Eleventh, which was adapted for him from the French verse play by Casimir Delavigne into more or less colloquial English.

Fabien dei Franchi gives great scope for menacing intensity, in fact it is the *note* of the character ; and in *Pauline* there is a scene portraying a white heat of passion. Both of these Kean was able to express with a conviction so perfect that he carried his audience off their feet.

The eccentric humours, varied by outbursts of demoniacal fury, which characterise Mephisto make him almost certain of his effect—if the version used is tolerable.

None of these parts is difficult. But Louis requires a very full equipment of experience and technique for its adequate portrayal. To the thoroughly accomplished actor the part is a gift, but even he won't excel in it if he lack some very particular abilities. Indeed I do not know a more exacting part. I have read exhaustive criticisms of Kean's performance and so have been able to reconstruct it scene by scene and compare it with Irving's. I am obliged to admit that there can be no doubt that Kean's portrayal of the wily Valois must have been nearer the truth than Irving's. I mean more nearly a reproduction of the actual man ; nearer to artistic truth it would be impossible for anyone to approach—but we are not talking of Irving.



## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-SIX

Much has been said and written of Charles Kean's Shakespearean productions—of his “hanging the Drama on a clothes-peg.” One day we will talk about this—and of the disparaging criticisms of Irving's method bracketed with Kean's for condemnation. It is a large subject much discussed—especially by those who saw neither.

Samuel Phelps, whom Macready brought from Bristol to join his company when he started his management at Covent Garden, commenced a season of Legitimate Drama at the suburban theatre of Sadler's Wells in 1844. He was the first to take advantage of a new Act which allowed the great plays to be performed in minor theatres. It was not unlike Miss Bayliss' venture at the Old Vic. though Phelps had the advantage of a strong personality in his Star and the co-operation of a company of recognised players—the Pit of those days were intolerant of the efforts of novices—including Mrs. Warner (late Miss Huddart) as his Leading Lady.

During a season that lasted over eighteen years Phelps staged every play of Shakespeare's except *Titus Andronicus*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Richard the Second* and the three parts of *Henry the Sixth*, as well as many of the standard works, notably Sergeant Talfourd's beautiful play *Ion* (originally produced by Macready) and *The Bridal*, expurgated and elaborated by Sheridan Knowles from Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, in which Betterton took his farewell as Melantius. My father saw most of these revivals and the impression I gained from his description was that Phelps was a more intellectual edition of John Ryder, whom I remember well. I should be sorry to think this was all the truth, for a heavier actor than Ryder I have never seen and, on occasions, a more mono-



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tonous old bore I have never listened to. From the standpoint of lung power, though Ryder had what the old actors called "a powerful organ," Tom Mead could thunder him off the stage, but Mead was human and flexible; Ryder was a block of granite and not the Aberdeen variety—that scintillates. I saw both of them as *The Ghost* and there was no comparison. Ryder I also saw as Colonel Damas and he had about as much humour as — Well, as old Arthur Stirling in the same part. I had also the good fortune to see the perfect performance of it by Fred Everill.

Phelps it would seem had one grave fault: inordinate self-pity in pathetic passages. He was at his best when suffering under injustice or in furious resentment as, for example, in *King and no King* (Beaumont and Fletcher) in the character of Arbaces.

He was the ideal Macduff.

I think it is agreed that his very best work was done as Sir Pertinax MacSychophant in Macklin's old play and as Falstaff, which, however, was too dry; as Parolles, though I cannot conceive that his touch was sufficiently light; as Christopher Sly and Bottom the Weaver, both of which would seem to have been quite perfect; and as Justice Shallow (which he doubled with the King) in *Henry the Fourth, Part II*.

His Macbeth was rugged and forceful and not open to the reproach once advanced against Macready's rendering, that fine and classical as it was, it still suggested a "very respectable Scottish gentleman in considerable difficulties." His Lear and Othello were both intensely pathetic, in fact it was said of him that he sacrificed to pathos his vigour and dignity. His Melantius was very fine indeed, but in this play of *The Bridal* it would be impossible for

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-SIX

any good actor to go wrong, the sympathy is so perfect. But Adrastus in *Ion*, another noble and wonderful part, was, I should say—after Sir Pertinax—his greatest achievement.

I have talked much of Phelps with two old friends both of whom appeared with him in many plays and are themselves among the best judges of plays and acting that I know, and their verdicts are strikingly contradictory. One assures me that the public to-day would not tolerate Phelps' method, and if he was at all like John Ryder I can well believe it. But the other protests he was the finest actor within living memory—that his Macbeth and Othello were beyond criticism, even as my Father allowed were his performances of Bottom and of Sly.

In 1862 Phelps retired from the management of Sadler's Wells. He played afterwards at Drury Lane in sundry adaptations from Sir Walter Scott's novels under the management of F. B. Chatterton, and I remember my father's enthusiasm over his Job Thornbury, in a special performance, with all the Stars in the cast, of *John Bull* at the Gaiety.

Speaking of Phelps reminds me that in his company—not at Sadler's Wells—was a Comedian named James Fawn, who afterwards became famous in the Music Halls, especially for his songs *Ask a Policeman* and *His Lordship winked at the Counsel*. I have heartily enjoyed both, which he sang with such rich and unctuous humour that their fame spread all over the Country ; the first, indeed, has added an idiom to the language. I saw Jimmy Fawn as the invaluable foil to Arthur Roberts in many Pantomimes at Drury Lane and always loved his jolly face and the flexibility of his art. In earlier days he had also been a member of lovely Marie Litton's Old Comedy Company, when I fancy I remember

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his Diggory. He is an old man now, well over seventy, I should judge, but he still exercises his old spell in the Music Halls.

Phelps' management at Sadler's Wells and Charles Kean's at the Princess' ended almost simultaneously in the first years of the Sixties and the English Drama had no Chief for a decade. I doubt, though, if even then its state was as ignominious as it is to-day.

For heaven's sake contradict me !



## LETTER XLVII

London

18th December, 1919.

When I think that I remember the introduction of Golf, Bananas and Tomatoes (as food for humans) into this Country I feel very old. I mean, of course, the revival of Golf. The Sport of Kings was indulged by James the First and we may picture him discoursing learnedly with Steenie while putting at the Seventeenth.

Bananas—or plantains, for I believe the bulk of such upon the market are in reality that same bread-fruit that sustained the Swiss Family Robinson in their many trivial trials and tempered tribulations—were introduced by Fyffe Elders (or is it Elders and Fyffe?) who built a fleet with their profits on the traffic.

Tomatoes, when I was a child, were used as table decoration “because they were a pretty colour,” but their destiny was to feed the pigs. *Autre temps, autre mœurs.*

These facts make me feel more ancient than my recollections of Boucicault as Con the Shaughraun as played at the Adelphi Theatre after a Pantomime in which Connie Gilchrist (Marchioness of Orkney) appeared *as a child*! Connie Gilchrist, whom I can picture now, a slim and dainty fairy in gold-spangled black at the old Gaiety, long before Fred Leslie's time.

But Boucicault's plays!

How wonderful they were—and are. But they will never be acted again. They are a unique possession like our Old English Comedy—not so valuable, of course, but quite as individual. What would the public of to-day say of them could they see them acted as I have seen them?

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I don't hesitate to answer. I *know*. You would have to book your Stall three months ahead. The manager would make a fortune if he could find his actors ; that's where the catch is—he couldn't.

I saw a revival of *Arrah-na-Pogue* (Arrah of the Kiss) some twenty-five years ago at the Princess'. We called it *Arrah-no-brogue*, because only one or two of the cast could manage the Irish accent. I had seen Mary Rorke as Arrah at the Adelphi years before : the freshest, creamiest Irish colleen with blue eyes and a cascade of chestnut hair, and her Story of the Kiss was one of the sweetest things I can remember. Then Charlie Sullivan was Shaun and Pateman Michael Feeney ; J. D. Beveridge (happily still with us) The O'Grady and John Carter The Secretary of State. Those were joyous days, joyous for public and actors alike. Refreshment and Invigoration !

At the Princess' Ellaline Terriss was Arrah ; pretty as a picture, but a picture rather of Red Riding-Hood than of an Irish peasant girl. Wilfred Shine was Shaun ; a clever actor, but lacking the fulness of geniality and lovable roguery essential to the character. Henry Neville was The O'Grady ; you know how I valued him, but I was sorry to see him in that part. He was as utterly wrong as Beveridge was entirely right. Old Henry Bedford was the English Sergeant and perhaps gave the one satisfactory performance in a most disappointing production.

But never shall I forget the group of Irish peasants ! A dirty crew they should have been and full of humour. In the last Act The O'Grady offers a reward to whomever will save the man who has fallen from the cliff into the sea. The rascallions rush off to haul the derelict ashore and soon they crowd back shouting : " We've got 'un ! "



## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-SEVEN

“ Who is it ? ” asks The O’Grady.

“ Michael Feeney ! ” yell the mob (Feeney is the Informer).

“ I withdraw the reward ! ” says The O’Grady.

“ Begorra, then we’ll go an’ shove ’un in agin ! ” shriek the peasants as they scramble off.

It is an episode which always delights the audience, who execrate the dirty little Informer as he deserves.

But at the Princess’, if you please, these parts were played by young gentlemen of Bond Street mien and Covent Garden Fancy Ball habit—I speak of Bond Street and Covent Garden as they were in that day—and Lanagan and Oiny Farrell, the ringleaders, who should wear ragged shirts, torn pants, shock heads and broad grins were personated by Tom Kingston and L. (I forget what the initial stands for) Warner. The first won recognition as a Juvenile Lead—possibly because he played Lanagan on those lines ; the second was ultimately known to Fame (in Bond Street) as Cheiro the Palmist. Both were impeccable in fine linen with glossy locks surmounting (in the case of Cheiro) Apollonian features. The memory of his gently apologetic murmur : “ Ah, well, we will go and throw him back again ” lives with me now—and now I see the humour of it ; then it incensed me as the mention of Gladstone did my father. The worst of it is though, that an audience, knowing nothing of what should be, condemn a play—and its kind—because of such perversions.

*The Shaughraun* is, I suppose, the best play of the series and *The Colleen Bawn* the prettiest, but *Arrah* was always my favourite.

*The Green Bushes* by J. C. Buckstone belongs also to this type and I can recall two productions of it as vividly as those of the Boucicault dramas. The first was at the



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Princess' with Henry Neville at his best as Connor O'Kennedy, Edward Compton as the villainous George (this was before he started his Company with the Old English Comedies), Shiel Barry as Wild Murtoth and Robert Pateman and Harry Proctor (slightly hunchbacked but most excellent actor) as Muster Grinnidge and Jack Gong, the parts originally played by Edward Wright and Paul Bedford, whose "I believe you, my boy!" became as popular a saying as the "Whoa Emma!" of my childhood. Bella Pateman was the Indian Miami who is eventually discovered to be a French Countess, a part written for the beautiful Madame Celeste. I remember particularly the lovely Florence Gerard as Geraldine, though I forget who played Nelly O'Neil.

But "what a change came o'er the spirit of my dream" when I saw the revival at the Adelphi some thirty years ago. Frank Cooper lacked the *panache* of Neville. W. L. Abingdon was no doubt far better than Compton; but Beveridge, excellent as he is, was not so good as Shiel Barry and John L. Shine and Lionel Rignold are not to be mentioned in the same breath with their predecessors. Pateman, by the way, I met only a few days ago, not perhaps as hale and hearty as ever, but looking wonderful when one considers his great age—he is in his eightieth year—and still radiating that aura of nervous intensity that he controlled so perfectly and used so skilfully as Quilp, Michael Feeney, Harvey Duff and Humpy Logan. Mary Rorke, whom I love dearly, was Miami at the Adelphi, but the part was outside her scope. She was essentially the Juvenile Lady as to-day she is the sweetest of Matrons; devastating emotion it is beyond her to express.

These plays are all built upon a sympathetic under-

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-SEVEN

standing of Irish qualities, the good and the bad, and in them may be found the key of that eternal puzzle we call The Irish Question. Read them in the light of two facts : there were 835 Kings of Ireland and only one died in his bed—four or five were struck by lightning !—I don't wonder—but the rest were either killed fighting or murdered, generally by their successors—only once did an Irish army beat the English in open fight and then only because the English General so despised his enemy that having marched his troops for twenty-four hours he lead them at once to the attack, disdaining the idea of rest and refreshment, as who should say : We'll just polish off this job first. But the Irish, in overwhelming numbers—I think it was four to one—knowing their opponents' condition stood up to them (for once !) and routed them.

Irish regiments under English generalship have performed prodigies of valour ; English-Irish Generals (as Wellington) leading English troops leavened by Irish have under them what is probably the best fighting material in the world. But the native Irish instinct is for guerilla warfare—especially for sudden attack in superior force from cover.

The typical Irishman subsists on excitement and cannot live without his grievance.

Wild Murtoth's " Who'll thread on the tail o' me coat, it's blue mouldy for the want of a batin' ! " expresses the type ; and so does Con's poetry and humour, though the average Irishman's humour is not so conscious as the cowardice and venom of Michael Feeney or Corrigan. The O'Grady is a great gentleman but as wrong-headed as Mylcs-na-Coppaleen. None of them have sense of proportion and you cannot alter the characteristics of a race.

If the World in council should ask Ireland, with every

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

desire to gratify her longings and ambitions : What do you want to make you content ? The voice of Ireland if it spoke truth would reply : Content, is ut ? Sure, that's the *last* thing we want !

Chris returns on Sunday for four weeks vacation. She has been too far North all the Autumn for me to visit her, but I hope to see her play when the tour is resumed, unless—it is a remote possibility—I succeed in getting work. Something I must have. I will take almost anything that offers, though for my life I dare not publish the fact as you may well suppose. Still nothing is derogatory if it pays ; a vile philosophy, but expressive of the Twentieth Century.

We shall do some theatres, Chris and I, while she is at home ; there is Harvey's Hamlet to be seen again and Moscovitch's Shylock.

Yours philosophically,



## LETTER XLVIII

London

24th December, 1919.

I haven't been able satisfactorily to digest your last letter, Redgie, not that you are obscure, but I have been absorbed. In what matters not. You shall know if it prospers, otherwise—Who cares?

As I grow old the difficulty of concentrating increases.

You too complain that concentration is an effort. That should not be. You say: "my mind is in a state of *nebulosity*," which Webster tells us is the mist which surrounds certain stars: illumination, then, is at the centre of your state and I await the discovery of its effulgence.

To quote you further: "It is agonizing this distracting knocking at the gate of consciousness of many subjects all falling over each other in the struggle for admittance."

To which I rejoin: Let nothing fash or faze you; admit all who give the counter-sign, *Vitalitas*, in answer to your Who-goes-there? Cultivate a habit of decision *to-day* even though to-morrow bring repentance. *Manana* is the evasion of the Indeterminate—correspondent to the Wait-and-See of the unprescient politician—who woos Morpheus on a restless pillow, finds cat-sleep with the sun-rise and sips early tea to soothe an aching head, murmuring *Quien sabe?* a proper demand for no man till his curfew is tolling.

Quick decisions induce refreshing sleep and a clear head at sun-rise rectifies the errors of yesterday.

But I neglect your letter: "Continuity," you say, "Continuity, all must be continuity if success is to be achieved."

Continuity of effort towards a single aim, I infer. Quite so. I agree—to a point; but I should grieve if you aban-

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doned your numerous interests to concentrate upon one only. You appear to have a gift for immersing yourself for short periods in a given subject to the exclusion of all others—to be able to pigeon-hole it and take up a second with the same whole-hearted though most circumspect enthusiasm. For a young man this aptitude opens pit-falls. This is an age of specialization; no one is allowed capable of excellence in more than one department and licence is admitted for that only if he fills it supremely well—or, let us say, well enough to pose as an expert. It is not quite the same thing, though it ought to be. In my opinion this is disastrous, but I recognise that I am in a hopeless minority.

We all know the disability that attaches to Jack of all Trades, but the modern idea that one should specialize in but one branch of the selected Trade precludes mastery of it—in the sense in which the axiom was originally employed.

There is happiness in Jackdom, it breeds a resourceful spirit and you, for one, find far more pleasure therein than you would ever know as the studious specialist you so admire and would emulate.

In this last letter after most generously encouraging me to continue my sketches of actors—dry as I fear you must have found them—you touch upon at least half a dozen subjects, each of which would easily furnish us with food for a week's discussion—if we could preserve that sense of Continuity. Your favourite theme is, of course, Poetry, and it is a thousand pities that in addition to your gift you have not that wonderful development of business acumen—like John Drinkwater, for example—that guides the possessor in the art of Boost. Personally I can't regret it, because I know that quality inevitably suffers in the process—even as it does in the case of whiskey and cigars. Give

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-EIGHT

me the unboosted brands ; if they can live at all in face of the strenuous competition of the grossly advertised it must be because of their quality. I *never* use Pears' Soap.

I have admitted to you frankly my obvious limitations as a critic of verse. I am rarely capable of separating the subject from the form and unless one can do so one's opinion is valueless for form is everything in poetry and the matter concerns not a jot its poetical worth. Though I recognise this truth I still must be influenced by the subject—which proves that I have no soul for poetry as such. It is rarely indeed that one happens upon verse that by sheer beauty of its form intoxicates as wine, or sweeps one into the thrall of a new sensation as Béranger's *Le Roi d'Yvetot* or Victor Hugo's *Gastibelza*. One does not find the inspired simplicity of "*Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne m'a rendrai fou*" many times among the countless volumes of pretentiousness. I have found it in Herrick and Lovelace ; but I suspect myself always of being moved by the sentiment even when I find beauty in the form.

Listen to this :—

" I envy no mortal tho' ever so great  
" Nor scorn I a wretch for his lowly estate,  
" But what I abhor and esteem as a curse  
" Is poorness of spirit, not poorness of purse."

That pleases me and I believe because of the form—though "abhor" is anti-climax, for it is stronger than what follows.

And this (which you will wisely prefer) :—

" What if the world, with a lure of its wealth,  
" Raise thy degree to great place of high advancing ;  
" May not the world, by a check of that wealth,  
" Bring thee again to as low despised changing ?



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

“ While the sun of wealth doth shine  
“ Thou shalt have friends plenty ;  
“ But, come want, they repine,  
“ Not one abides in twenty.  
“ Wealth (and friends) holds and ends,  
“ As thy fortunes rise and fall ;  
“ Up and down, smile and frown,  
“ Certain is no state at all.”

I should like to have written that ; though I should have worried horribly over “ advancing ” and “ changing ” —but then I’m no poet.

It is your poetic instinct that has aroused in you a certain interest in the Drama because the greatest poets are essentially dramatic ; but your interest is ideal ; though you love the Drama you despise the Stage and there is much to commend your judgment.

Your skill in Music and Drawing would be perpetual reproaches to you were it not for that faculty of pigeon-holing, for each clamours to be developed as it might and should be. I have heard pianists of the first order who might envy you your *touch* and I have heard none who can pluck such harp-like chords in *arpeggio* from the piano on occasion.

The ease with which you sketch the unmistakable portrait of an absent friend or acquaintance or of some figure who has arrested your attention in the street is most enviable.

But I think the gift I envy most is your clairvoyant ability to read character from hand-writing. I shall never forget the amazing result of sending you the *menu* of a certain luncheon party signed by the six participants. It was incredible that you did not know one of them even by name and yet could read in most intimate detail not merely their salient characteristics but precise *minutiae* of their qualities.

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-EIGHT

Yes, you must preserve your Jackdom, Redgie ; foster your historical sense, indulge your instinct for sport and the *wanderlust*.

I think of your experiences I envy most your knowledge of the Continent ; Switzerland, Norway, Italy, the Rhineland and—above all—the Chateaux of the Loire. How I longed for all that — once !

Then, too, I would I had your adaptable spirit which can ride the storm and—what is perhaps more difficult—subdue the dank apathy of a Scotch mist. Ah, well, I have still—D.V. — a few years to go and Hope is not the monopoly of the Miserable—Ambition, when it is worthily inspired, does not always “fall on the other”—I know that “chance may crown me without my stir” ; I know also that *may* is the emphatic word. The wise expect the least possible of Chance.

To-morrow is Christmas Day.

I envy you—I am doing little else, it seems, to-day—an old-fashioned Christmas at home with your Mother and Sister. May you all be very very happy !

As for Chris and me, we shall dine at some restaurant. I hate it but the atmosphere will be amusement for the child ; Frascati's (for instance) is cheery contrast to a dull round of provincial lodgings ; linoleum-covered floors, horsehair arm-chairs and lace window-curtains—probably saffron-tinted ! Appalling !

Chris would willingly keep me company by our fire-side—at least she says so. I wonder.

To tell the truth convincingly often needs as much tact as to invent diplomatic falsehood.

With no intent to deceive, a woman must always be a mystery to a man. That does not mean that she must lie to him as so many think essential.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

But how delightful to know her the soul of Truth and yet improbable.

No man worth the name deceives any who trust him ; trust is a tie that binds, for honesty. But to be distrusted invites ingenuity to warrant that distrust.

But I wander from Chris. She does not hanker for flesh-pots but she likes what she calls Fun. So do I.

But where to find it in these days ? I don't want to drink—over-much, nor to indulge in any excess but there is little fun in 1919.

Hysteria in plenty ; much decadence in Form ; much flaunting of stark shoulder-blades and impudent backs ; much monocled criticism of indiscreet *lingerie* ; much popping of ginger-ale corks !

Pussyfoot rampant—with his sly intemperant wink.

I find little *fun* in the anæmic joys of teetotal debauchery.

But I wish you merry.

Yours especially,



## LETTER XLIX

London

30th December, 1919.

One fears drifting into a habit because one grows apt thereby to function without sensing ; as example, note the way nearly everyone starts a letter. Though they may vary it for different correspondents, they form the habit of addressing the same person always in identical terms, which after a while become meaningless because mechanical. If Eliza *always* waves her handkerchief to John as he turns the corner the day comes when neither her signal nor his answering smile mean anything at all. Your own dictum that to preserve vitality in interest is the only means of fighting habit is irrefutable, for interest dies as habit grows—stultified.

“ Familiarity breeds contempt ” simply because familiarity is stagnation and stagnation is the first stage of decay. If the afore-mentioned John invariably brings home a bunch of flowers for his Eliza the day inevitably arrives when he presents and she accepts mechanically—without thought of the meaning, which, indeed, the gift has lost. Eliza accepts unconsciously, even the florist has the bunch ready ; John flings his coin on the counter, thinking how he will circumvent Robinson at to-morrow’s board meeting, takes up the bouquet and forgets even that he has entered the shop till, in a pause as he is held up on the kerb by a passing car, he perceives it in the accustomed hand.

I believe we have happened here upon one of the chief causes of disruption in the marriage state, a cause as fruitful of disaster as the hackneyed incompatibility. Yet as we age the struggle to avoid becoming groovish grows increasingly difficult and to be aware of it is a sign of conscious decay.

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

But my avoidance of the formula "My dear——Whoever-it-may-happen-to-be" is no mere affectation. I have never used it for my friends since I could think. I keep it for acquaintances—and the tax-collector, and I hope the last appreciates the irony.

So your local Play Society invites you to head the opposition at its next debate. Your notes are admirable and if you were to open the proceedings you could put up a fine fight on the lines they suggest. But the case is different. You cannot prepare your speech unless the proposer will first allow you to read his ; for how is it possible to refute in advance arguments that one has never heard. You must, of course, speak *extempore*. Your position is stronger than your opponent's for this reason ; he is to hold forth on the text. The Theatre of To-day as a Cultural Force is a Failure ; as it is an axiom in logic that a negative is incapable of proof your affirmative has the better logical possibility. Your difficulty will be, I anticipate, to keep your opponent to the point ; he is certain to venture on to your ground unless he has a very sure logical sense. The rules of procedure are always stumbling-blocks to the illogical.

It is by no means easy to prove failure—financial failure, yes ; but *cultural* failure ! Oh, Mesopotamia ! Cultural is a blessed word. I am glad the dictionary dubs it *recent* and *rare* !

Most argument is stultified by fallible assumption. Watch him ! His examples will be sure to confound his thesis. Note his interpretation of his evidence. The rules of evidence never vary, no matter what the subject, but the interpretation may be as false as the testimony of the lying witness. Watch him, I say ! Keep your mind alert as the ears of a fox-terrier whose master has whispered Rats !



## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-NINE

And if he falsely interprets pounce on him and break his back.

But remember it is as feeble not to acknowledge conviction when faced with sound argument as not to hold to it when it is logically based.

The debate is a good move. Play Societies read too much and discuss too little. Then, too, they generally select undramatic plays and imagine they know all about the Drama because they have considered certain problems, mostly unwholesome, and reached tentative conclusions on the pseudo-social questions that such plays usually propound. A play is not a play until it is *acted* and if it won't act it is never, properly speaking, a play at all.

Your reflections on Success are illuminating, but in my view its worth must be determined altogether by its quality. To "get there" unworthily is not success; it may, in fact, be the result of dire and horrible failure. Where is the use of winning the height if your standard is in the ditch? The way to enjoy life is to take firmly one's place in the world *as a right*, the place that is indisputably one's own. Others are always willing to concede it if one is firm—really knows what one wants and is able to hold it with a proper sense of proportion. This last is the great difficulty: to reconcile what is due to oneself with what is due to others. But as, in justice, we would deny to no man the reward of his deserving, so if we are confident in our own we know we wrong none by taking it.

Pouring with rain and London not so full as it has been. Theatres doing poorly. Covent Garden almost empty, I hear. Harvey should have opened his season with *The Only Way* and so rallied round him all his old admirers before challenging the critics with a



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

new and, as I gather, somewhat *bizarre* production of *Hamlet*.

The weather is the worst for playgoers ; in 'buses and Tubes they are packed like grain in a sack and the supply of taxis insufficient by ninety per cent. If one does not possess a car and is not inclined to walk one stays at home.

Frankly I detest the notion of the all-woman cast for *Hamlet*. Recognised Stars—I mean woman Stars—have played him for a century but they did not venture with all-woman support. The idea is part of the modern topsyturvation and is more than a little unwholesome. The Queen must suffer by a female husband and son—to say nothing of poor Ophelia's sufferings by a female father, brother and lover.

And as for female grave-diggers—"Angels and Ministers of grace—"!

During the war there may have been excuse for male impersonation at the Old Vic. and elsewhere, but such excuse no longer exists.

The Divine Sarah made her great mistake in *Hamlet*. Women forget that man's dress emphasises their womanishness as it destroys their womanliness.

True that *Hamlet* has a deep streak of the feminine, but what of his deeper virility ? The sweetness, gentleness and lovable qualities of *Hamlet* have in them nothing of effeminacy.

I do not count sustained introspection as a feminine quality and I doubt a woman's power to suggest it.

I can think of but one great *rôle*—that a woman might attempt—a shade worse in woman's hands and that is *Romeo*. *Romeo* is on occasions so perilously near to effeminacy that nothing less than innate manliness can save him.

## LETTER NUMBER FORTY-NINE

You may remind me of the success of Charlotte Cushman and, comparatively recently of Esmé Beringer, but mannish as they may have been in the passages of love-sickness, vacillation and youthful enthusiasm, I cannot believe that any woman could rise to the height of passionate, male rebellion in the scene with the Friar or plumb the depths of manly despair in the last Act.

Though no actor of accomplishment can fail to make Hamlet interesting if he will be simple where he should and interpret where he must, I remember Irving too clearly to be satisfied with anything less than he gave us.

Later.

*New Year's Eve.*

Oh, those old Lyceum days !

I am sick at heart when I reflect that they are gone *for ever* ! —that anything like them is no longer possible. The veil is rent ; the holy of holies desecrated by the glare of electric light and the stare of penny-a-liners ; the spirit exorcised.

I am sitting by an almost extinct fire. Chris, I hope, is sleeping. We have been to Sloane Square to see *The Merchant of Venice*, Heaven help us !

The poor child learned at school almost to hate the beautiful play. This experience has not taught her to love it. She will see it again, she says, only if I again play Shylock. To-night I don't feel that I ever wish to.

Portia wasn't there, and—O Nerissa ! A lady new to me, Miss Edith Evans, spoke the lines, but Nerissa didn't exist. Jessica (Miss Cathleen Nesbit) was excellent and her scene (usually omitted) with Launcelot—perfectly played by Miles Malleon, the best Shakespearean clown I have seen for years—was the best thing in the play.

Maurice Moscovitch was the Shylock. He is new in the

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West End ; he has played in Yiddish in Whitechapel and before that for twenty years in America. He is a German, I understand, by name Roser, but a Russian— or Polish— name is no doubt more discreet in the light of recent events.

He is a clever actor with an admirable technique, fine, robust presence and voice, but with a strong accent.

But Shylock—

Any interpretation that does not combine the classic with the natural method must fall short of the truth—this is, of course, true of all Shakespeare's characters.

Shylock is the classic embodiment of a supreme artist's conception of the sublimity which attains its highest expression in the Oriental governed by a ruthless passion. He is neither a Teutonic usurer in a fit of epilepsy nor a Houndsditch pawn-broker jazzing on the Rialto.

Here was no Chapter of Genesis.

The Eighties would have hissed the whole thing off the stage.

I applaud the Eighties !

Happiness in the New Year for you and yours.

“ Fortune play upon thy prosperous helm.”



### *ERRATUM*

The statement on Page 290 that Mr. Maurice Moscovitch is a German by name Roser is incorrect. He was in fact born in Russia of Russian parents and is an American citizen. The publisher deeply regrets any inconvenience that the inclusion of the statement may have caused Mr. Moscovitch.



## LETTER L

London

14th January, 1920.

On the 31st of October, 1874, London acclaimed the Hamlet of Henry Irving.

Irving had already carried the town with his Digby Grant in *Two Roses* and Mathias in *The Bells*. Hamlet set the seal upon him as the pre-eminent actor of his time. And since that day, I dare assert, no actor has arisen whose work can stand the test of comparison with Irving's.

By his performance of Hamlet Irving shed new light in the same sense as Kean had done with Shylock sixty years earlier.

As Kean vivified the statuesque so Irving humanized the artificial.

It was the Human Touch once more.

Though the ponderous method of past generations was eschewed, no beauty nor grandeur of the verse was slurred or blurred and all was touched with a princely dignity and a classic grace, yet there was no suspicion of that frock-coated modernity or casual flippancy that has marred the efforts of so many of his successors.

I could write reams about *Hamlet* without attempting to add anything—which for me would be impossible—to the volumes of erudition that have been written on the subject but simply to tell you of certain views I hold gathered from my experience and observation of performance of the character.

Louis Calvert wished to prove conclusively that Hamlet was mad so he wrote a book and then gave a performance to illustrate his theory.

Unfortunately I missed it—and so, I fear, did he; for



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had he made his point the world must have rung with the news.

Irving was my first Hamlet and I admit that first impressions are apt to bias judgment, but I can recall certain details with absolute clearness and I have never seen a Hamlet since who could sustain comparison in any of those details.

Lest you think I may have been too young in 1874 to judge I must tell you that I refer to the Lyceum revival of 1878—and subsequently—for my impressions.

I have attempted the part myself. I know the pitfalls and the hurdles. I think I could take anybody through the play and tell them what to do and what to avoid in order to attain the effect that Irving made. Not to teach him voice production and elocution, *bien entendu*—I should as soon think of supplying a boot-black with brushes and blacking—but, to follow the simile, to show him how to put on the shine.

Irving used his personality, of course ; that does not mean that he did not personate. He did. It was no mere exploitation of Henry Irving, though, but a highly skilled technical exposition, developed by a soul of understanding and illumined by genius.

Intellectuality can express itself for expression is part of itself, but it cramps imagination. I count it better to possess imagination without intellectuality to express it than to possess a large intellectuality and have nothing but commonplace to express.

But suppose intellectuality brought to the aid of imagination—that is, *after* imagination has had full play !

That is how—and I believe *why*—Irving triumphed.

I have seen the perfect intellectual Hamlet.

I have seen more than one imaginative Hamlet.

## LETTER NUMBER FIFTY

Irving is the only Hamlet I have ever seen, who, having given full rein to his imagination, controlled and co-ordinated all by his intellect.

But Irving was a great interpreter. He knew that perfection is never attained ; yet he had striven and attained more skill in it than any actor of my time. Moreover his “ infinite pains ” were lit by the spark of intuition, that in-born actor-sense.

Irving was the only actor I have seen who identified himself so with the character that you could accept him in every phase of it as indeed the man he personated. What I mean is that you never thought of him as Irving but only as Hamlet ; and to this day when I think of Hamlet I think of him as Irving showed him. He was not ideal pictorially, but what he was not he suggested so perfectly by a courtliness so gracious—a fate-laden sense so tragic—a pity so profound—an exaltation so spiritual that you accepted that husk as the ideal because it held the soul of the ideal you pictured.

Hamlet is the actor's surest investment ; no actor can fail in it, it is actor-proof. Understand what that implies—*actor-proof* !

This is not to belittle the accomplishment of any actor who can bring something to his performance above and beyond the effect that mere performance of it must create. It would be presumption in me to try to add to what Quiller-Couch and others have written on this subject. I know you have Quiller-Couch's book.

But the amazing thing about Hamlet is the effect that may be created by the actor who does not *act* at all but just says the words.

Chris and I have just been to Covent Garden to see Martin Harvey and on that particular evening he certainly

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did no more. He spoke the text—more of it than usual—many scenes in settings of curtains so glaring that they distracted attention from the action, but the grip of the play was there, though to me it was painful to sit still while so much of the drama was dissipated and the tragedy omitted.

The best Ophelias I have seen — except Ellen Terry — have always been too old. The first of these was a fine actress, Louise Moodie. The part is a very easy and grateful one, yet it requires considerable art to squeeze the last drop out of it. The Mad Scene is a gift. None can fail in that. I think Mrs. Harvey is quite the best now that I have seen her a third time—the first time I thought her dreadful. This time I could find no fault with any single point of her performance.

Mrs. Tree was tame to a degree. Ophelia is pale, if you will ; grey-eyed, *blonde-cendrée*, but not colourless.

I speak, understood, of the days when she *was* Mrs. Tree and remember with gratitude her brilliant Mrs. Murgatroyd in Sydney Grundy's *A Bunch of Violets*, adapted from Octave Feuillet's *Montjoye*, at the Haymarket ; and much later, and most especially, her splendid Agrippina in Stephen Phillips' *Nero* at His Majesty's, a performance more nearly in the Grand Manner than any I have seen for many years.

But I was talking of Ophelia : Mrs. Patriek Campbell was physically and temperamentally unsuited. Who could think she would not be ? However, she played it with Forbes-Robertson.

I have referred above to the perfect intellectual Hamlet. I was thinking of Forbes-Robertson. It would be quite impossible to imagine a more perfect reading than he gave ;



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every line was spoken with a nicety so flawless that as it fell on the ear it satisfied by its perfect modulation as the rhythm of lapping waves. But there was never a spark—never a thrill—never a note of exultation or the crash of passion.

Forbes-Robertson *recited* Hamlet to perfection. Irving *felt* Hamlet. You could see the thought stabbing him before he gave it breath, and that gave his performance a novelty and reality as striking as it was original.

The part had been intoned—vocalized—thundered. It had been acted for point-making—as I have seen it since with excellent effect. The play never fails with a popular audience when thus interpreted. It never before had been *thought aloud*!

Consider: until he meets Ophelia Hamlet does little else but think aloud. Obsessed as he is by one idea, it is only his excessive gentleness and courtesy that detach him, so to say, from his obsession to hold converse with his interlocutors. There are points in plenty for whomever cares to make them, but Shakespeare can take care of that if the actor will leave it to him. This is what Irving did; he was intent on revealing the soul of the character which so far is not stirred to action.

In the four great scenes of Act III he showed us that soul in contact with the world—the Court—the two women he loved and his enemy: and in each scene he struck sparks that illumined.

None ever illustrated so vividly the tenderness of Hamlet's passion for Ophelia.

None ever spoke less pedantically and didactically the Advice to the Players, which became a conference of artists rather than authoritative injunction to subordinates.

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None was ever more electrically triumphant in the success of the Mousetrap.

None imbued with more tragic solemnity tempered by filial piety the midnight interview with his Mother.

In this last scene was no picture either of Claudius or the dead King, nor did Hamlet wear a medallion of his father at his neck ; “ this picture—and this ” were “ in the mind’s eye ” and so I have always seen them most vivid.

Before his first appearance challenged the criticism of London Irving had played the King, the Ghost, Laertes, Horatio, Osric, Guildenstern and the Priest, not to mention the part of Hamlet himself in Edinburgh and in Manchester. It is certain that he did—or omitted to do—nothing in his performance without most careful study and deliberation.

I remember a small example of what actors call business that may interest you :—

The Queen (Miss Pauncefort, Mother of the present Georgina Pauncefort, the last of our Mrs. Malaprops, Mrs. Candours and Mrs. Hardcastles) carried a fan of peacocks’ feathers, defying an old theatrical superstition—Augustus Harris once seized a lady by the shoulders and rushed her off the stage and out of the stage-door, breathlessly, because she arrived for rehearsal at Drury Lane with peacocks’ feathers in her hat, saying : “ Go home and never dare again to enter my theatre in that hat ! Do you want the play to be a failure ? ”—but I am wandering.

During the Play Scene Irving as Hamlet plucked a feather from his Mother’s fan, retaining it unconsciously, and in the climax found his inspiration for the line :—

“ . . . . . and now reigns here

“ A very very—pajock ! ”

as he flung it from him, subsiding into the vacant throne.

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I have known actors resort to many devices to help this climax but none more aptly conformable to the text.

It is perhaps altogether in Irving's favour that I cannot tell you what he did at every point. What he did was always and inevitably the right thing—the natural thing—the only thing, so it seemed, that was possible. He was not merely great at moments but great in that he maintained the highest level of excellence throughout the performance of his very noble and beautiful conception.

But I haven't expressed what I conceive to be the particular excellence of his embodiment.

I will try.

There is a quality essential in the ideal impersonation of Hamlet, a quality of pure spirituality; mystic, ascetic, ethereal, which it is as important to emphasize as the courtly grace, the dignity, the humour, kindly and mordant, the moments of decisive action and the sudden bursts of passion.

This quality Irving possessed in a degree so marked that its hypnotic influence, which attracted while it hedged him, arrested, fascinated—riveted the attention to the exclusion of all surroundings wherever he might be. And for this he was heartily hated by some. No man, I suppose, had ever more venomous and unscrupulous enemies. And indeed some, even, of the unprejudiced might feel such remoteness—such isolation of personality in a sense repellant. But in Irving's case it was allied to a gentleness so human, a generosity so boundless, a princely urbanity so gracious that he won hearts even though he seemed of another flesh.

As Hamlet he used this quality with a perfection of artistic restraint and technical precision and the result in conjunction with his other abilities made his performance such as I



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cannot believe was ever seen before and—if only for technical reasons—I am quite certain can never be seen again.

Lest you should consider this too sweeping I will merely say that in his years of training at Edinburgh, Manchester, Dublin and elsewhere Irving played 588 parts—this before he was twenty-nine years of age. Such experience it is absolutely impossible for any actor to obtain to-day.

I shall try to tell you how Irving harnessed, so to say, this extraordinary spiritual quality and used it in other rôles—though never twice in exactly the same sense. But talking of Hamlet to-day has concentrated my thoughts on Irving and the many actors I have seen in the part. Yet to think of them is to remember only Irving. His majestic spirit o’ertops them all and breathes—without the need of utterance—

“ . . . . . This is I—

“ Hamlet the Dane ! ”

## LETTER LI

London

25th January, 1920.

I expect you know the story of the Scot, who, arriving at King's Cross, accosted the first policeman he saw with : " Wull ye no direct me tae the Caledonian Asylum." The reply was : " Mon, ye're in it."

I don't know what made me think of that—with whiskey at its present prohibitive price—unless it was a subconscious recollection of our first meeting in the North.

But, indeed, I love the Scots. I have always found them so generous, gracious and full of humour and I value those qualities in them the more that they are a discriminating race and I find that dourness of which many complain merely a cloak adopted for purposes of observation—of reconnoitring as one might say—before committing themselves to a friendship or even an intimacy.

As audience for a play I have found the public of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen the most discriminatingly appreciative in the Country.

Sir Walter Scott makes Louis the Eleventh say of Quentin Durward : " Proud as a Scot : the proverb never fails."

Dumas calls the Scots " the Gascons of the British Isles."

Chicot was a Gascon and so was D'Artagnan and Capitaine Fracasse, who was Monsieur le Baron de Sigognac du Chateau de la Misère.

I think Straforel must also have been, though I forget whether Rostand refers to his origin.

And the Gascons can't be translated into English. In my opinion nothing French can be, one must *feel* it. But to me the Gascon is a very fine fellow—the braggart, with humour, who is as good as his word and a bit better. He is

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the ideal swashbuckler ; and Shakespeare, I feel, had always a very warm corner in the capaciousness of his poetic heart for the swashbuckler.

He has given us, in the best known plays, four notable examples : Benedick, Mercutio, Gratiano and Petruchio, and of these Happy Dick is typically English.

Oh, yes, I know he is “ Signor Benedick of Padua ” ; but whether it was by design that he alone of all the cast was given an English name—if we except the Clowns—and whether he was so named to mark him English adventurer among the Messinians I do not know.

It would certainly be a mistake to play Benedick with a foreign accent—as Cartwright played the Italian villain in *In His Power* ; the scene being in Paris and all the characters talking (supposedly) in French, he spoke with an accent when he was assumed to be talking French and without it when, presumably, he was speaking in Italian. Interesting but more than a little confusing.

But this would not do for Benedick. Signor Mountanto is British to the backbone.

Irving was the only Benedick I have seen. I have watched others in the part ; Matheson Lang, Murray Carrington, George Alexander—they were all English enough, English to stodginess.

Irving was a great comedian. His touch was light but firm ; his wit sparkled ; his humour was effervescent and contagious ; he had a rare faculty for inviting—nay, compelling his audience to share the joke with him. As Benedick he was at his best.

The Lyceum production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in 1883 was the most satisfying thing I have ever seen at any time in any theatre. The cast was flawless. Ellen Terry



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surpassed herself ; her Beatrice was the triumph of her career and in all the cast there was not a performance that could have been bettered with the single exception of the Don John of that most admirable actor Charles Glenney, who was a thought too heavy. Excellent comedian as he was, his heavy manner—in that part, at least—was a trifle stodgy. Don John is always a problem. H. B. Irving came near to solving it in the St. James' production, but did not quite succeed.

But the others—I will tell you another time about the production as a whole. I want to talk now of Irving as Comedian.

I can't remember whether he used the traditional gag for the Curtain on the Church Scene. I expect so. Beatrice repeats to Benedick—after his final line in the text—"Kill him ! Kill him !" (sometimes : "Kill him *dead* ! ") and Benedick replies : "As I'm alive I will !" I am not defending it, I don't approve gagging in Shakespeare. But *Exeunt severally* is at times a trifle dissatisfying ; those two added lines do clinch the situation.

I remember Irving most clearly on his first entrance. Whoever was seeing the play for the first time and had never read it would know that those two, Benedick and Beatrice, must come together. They were made for each other.

"What, my dear Lady Disdain, are you yet living ? " is a phrase as endearing as expressive. In Irving's mouth it was a humorous caress.

"I cannot endure my Lady Tongue." Quite so. Till the moment of Beatrice's approach he has been alone with his friends to whom he has too deeply committed himself misogynist, though without any sort of real conviction, to recant—"talking through his hat " as we might say to-day.

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That wonderful spiritual quality of Irving served him well—as ever. However biting the tone of his raillery, the innate gentleness—I mustn't say gentility, the word has lost its savour—shone through.

His dignity in the Challenge Scene goes without saying and coming immediately after the perfect performances of Fernandez (whom I never saw to greater advantage than as Leonato) Henry Howe—Daddy Howe was then over eighty, I believe—Forbes-Robertson (the only possible Claudio) and Terriss (better even than Fred Terry as Don Pedro, and I can think of no higher praise) in that wonderful scene that mingles laughter and tears in such perfect proportion, was the surest test of his masterful, yet never arrogant, domination of any scene in which he appeared.

I wonder if you know the story of Robert Macaire. Briefly *L'Auberge des Adrets* is a drama of rather extravagant action and not too well written by MM. Benjamin, Saint Amand and Paulyanthe. It was produced at the *Ambigu-Comique* in 1823. Macaire the villain, an escaped gaol-bird, was cast to Frédéric Lemaître and Lemaître was in despair about it. It was the first part he created at this theatre and he saw no chance in it to score in any sense. A thought struck him and he plotted with Firmin, who was rehearsing Bertrand (Jacques Strop) Macaire's accomplice in crime, and together they evolved a pair of Originals whom on the first night they sprang on the astonished authors, management and audience. Both appeared in tattered clothing: Bertrand in an overcoat with trailing skirts and carrying an impossible umbrella; while Macaire wore a black patch over one eye, a very bad hat and carried a wooden snuff-box which he caused to creak and squeak as a signal whenever his companion went too far in his



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ridiculous excesses. The performance was a sensational success, much to the delight of MM. Benjamin and Saint-Amand and the chagrin of M. le Docteur Paulyanthe, who considered the mutilation of his work a sacrilege.

In due course the play was translated into English and was played here, notably by Charles Fechter as Robert Macaire. It passed into the repertory of stock plays and has been acted by most of the Stars. Irving played it at the St. James' (1867) and revived it at the Lyceum in 1888.

For this revival he engaged Weedon Grossmith to play Jacques Strop whose claim to fame was established by taking part with his brother, George Grossmith—celebrated for his association with the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas—in a comic duologue, based on the humorous aspect of dental extraction, at several Special and Benefit *matinée* performances.

When the curtain fell on the first night Irving was obliged to apologise for the new Jacques Strop whose performance had aroused the critical Pit to audible resentment.

Later Weedon Grossmith developed a technique which enabled him to exploit his idiosyncrasies and having several parts written to his personality by Pinero and others he was accepted by the public and enjoyed many notable successes.

*Robert Macaire* (as the English play is called) is poor drama, but the two characters in able hands are compensation. Irving's grim, and on occasion, tragic humour fascinated. I suspect he never indulged in the extravagance that Lemaître allowed himself. Fechter no doubt treated it more lightly, yet Irving would be more grotesque while never permitting us to lose sight of the conscienceless villain beneath the weirdly garbed exterior.



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Irving played Jingle at the Lyceum before his great success in *The Bells*. I did not see this—nor his Bob Gassitt in *Dearer than Life* at the Queen's in 1868. Both of these were kinsmen of Macaire, even to the spice of villainy, and both enhanced his—at that time—growing reputation.

He would have been ideal as Dick Swiveller.

Doricourt in *The Belle's Stratagem* which he played at the St. James' 1866, his first part in London, was another fine comedy performance, his mock Mad Scene gaining him great credit. He revived this play at the Lyceum with Ellen Terry as Letitia Hardy.

I saw him play Jeremy Diddler in James Kenney's *Raising the Wind* and a more joyous piece of irresponsible comedy I never witnessed—having missed Charles Mathews.

I emphasize Irving's powers as a Comedian because you may have heard them questioned—even sneered at—but no one could have excelled as he did as Hamlet, Richard the Third, Iago, Louis the Eleventh and Richelieu who lacked the sense of humour and the ability so fully commanded to express its varying shades.

The grim touches of humour in Dubosc were a potent factor of his triumphant success in the dual rôles of *The Lyons Mail*. But what served him here most happily was his faculty of arresting attention suddenly by what I may call the Menacing Comment. Its effect was like the sudden shooting of an iron bolt.

I have known only one other actor who possessed this technical quality in anything like equal degree; Charles Hudson, and because of it Hudson was accused of copying Irving. It was not so. It is no easy thing to copy another actor. Imagine it: to study and rehearse a new part and keep in mind all the time how that other *who has never played*

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*it* might play it and superimpose all his idiosyncrasies upon one's own conception. Women have done it, I believe; Lena Ashwell in her early days, it was said, had many copiers, but I have never known it successful—even commercially.

Irving employed his Menacing Comment with terrific effect as Mephistopheles. I suspect his performance far outshone Charles Kean's and Wills' drama of *Faust* was, I am sure, as superior to that used by Kean as it was to Tree's—and so was his production.

But if I talk of Irving's productions I shall never finish.

Imagine then, the Menacing Comment, the humour and that spiritual sense inverted, if I may say so, so that he radiated malignity in place of beneficence and you have a crude idea of Irving's Mephistopheles.

I did not see him play Digby Grant at the Vaudeville, but I know *Two Roses* well—played in it in my early days—and I know, though it is actor-proof, that no one could obtain the maximum of effect in it unless he modelled his performance upon Irving's.

Before this, in 1869 at the Gaiety, he had made a great hit as Mr. Reginald Chevenix in *Uncle Dick's Darling*, such a type as Dickens loved to create and modelled by H. J. Byron in somewhat the same mould as Mr. Dombey. Irving's performance of it stamped him as the man for Digby Grant and Digby Grant foreshadowed his approaching greatness.

I started with the Swashbucklers: what a Mercutio Irving must have been! but London never saw him in the part. He played Petruchio in Garrick's perversion of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the Queen's in 1867. This play, which he named *Catherine and Petruchio*, Garrick included in the list

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of his Dramatic Works. He did well ; Shakespeare would have disowned it. Yet in one of his Prefaces Garrick wrote—speaking of his *amended* versions of Shakespeare—

“ ’Tis my chief wish, my joy, my only plan

“ To lose no drop of that immortal man.”

This needs no comment.

In the revival at the Queen’s, now called *Katharine and Petruchio*, Irving first acted with Ellen Terry who was then the Katharine—at that time very bored with the Theatre and everything concerning it, as she tells us in her *Reminiscences*.

After Digby Grant Irving’s future was assured. He went to the Lyceum of which he became the Manager in 1878 and there inaugurated the most artistic and prosperous Temple of Dramatic Art the English Theatre has ever known.

In 1902 he was required by the London County Council to spend £10,000 on alterations and repairs to the building. At that time such outlay was impracticable. There were many reasons against compliance with such an exorbitant demand and so the Shrine was reduced to rubble and on its site arose the gaudy show-box that stands to-day. The spirit of Irving no longer haunts it.

It is of ironic interest to note that about the same time the L.C.C. *granted* the sum of £10,000 towards the cost of rebuilding the Gaiety Theatre, which until that time had stood facing the Lyceum on the opposite corner of Wellington Street.

*O tempora ! O mores !*

Yet that does not express my thought.

O degenerate age ! O pharisaical mentors who assassinate Thalia while subsidising Phryne !



## LETTER LII

London

10th February, 1920.

Well, Redgie, at last I have seen Chris play her first important leading part and I thank Heaven for both our sakes that it is an experience that can never occur again.

The poor child was ditherish with nerves because I was there and I suffered nearly as badly as she knowing that I could not deceive myself if she should fail to satisfy me. The result, as you may suppose, was not entirely satisfactory. That she did all that was possible I can't pretend but at least I can say that she made no grave mistake. Her comedy I found quite dainty but lacking in breadth, this may in some measure be set down to nerves but not entirely; more experience—more self-confidence will ripen her style. Her pathos rings true but she is inclined to the worst fault, self-pity. How I have dinned it into her to avoid that. It is the "smiling grief" that most touches hearts. As to technique, she took her hurdles and ditches well—that is to say she cleared them all, not always with a perfect seat and without effort but she neither faltered nor slipped. On the whole I was pleased as relieved. I was very glad to be able to write her a sincerely encouraging letter when I got home.

I understand why her manager can't find a good juvenile man to act with her. She is terribly handicapped by the man she has to play with. The truth is that the part is so poor that if he found an actor good enough for it it wouldn't be good enough for the actor, who could easily get twice what the part is worth for playing a better one.

Before she left Chris and I saw *In the Night* at the Kings-

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way. It will run, I think, unless its disregard of moral conventions shocks the public. It is astonishing how conventionally respectable the average citizen becomes when he visits a theatre ; he appears to have left his normal code of conduct at home. *In the Night* is a strong play, simple and well constructed, though not too well written. The scene is Paris. It sounds like an adaptation from the French, in fact I believe it is. It is well played. Alfred Drayton is admirable as the *Juge d'instruction*, marred only by a cockney accent which is the more noticeable for his Gallic beard. Reginald Owen is quite agreeable as the lover. Jessie Winter is her usual, lazy self, conveying the idea that the proceedings interest her but slightly, but many, I know, find this attitude charming. Clayton Greene is invaluable as a *Gend'arme* ; and Leslie Faber has one of the most wonderful parts ever written. I don't wish to detract from his cleverness, indeed he gives an excellent and consistent study, but imagine a character in which either Arthur Whitby, Ainley, C. W. Somerset or George Elton would be equally effective. It is so simple, the lines and situations so perfectly devised that either of those could do it with a minimum of effort and the maximum of effect. In a word ; *actor-proof*.

And even yet I don't think you know what I mean by that, in spite of my endeavours to explain. I certainly do *not* mean fool-proof, novice-proof, or that the part does not need an actor to play it. I mean one so well constructed and written that even an indifferent actor can hardly spoil it but which gives a really good one chances to exploit all he knows and without strenuous effort add the effect of his personality and his art to what is already effective even without such aids ; so that his credit will be—not unde-



## LETTER NUMBER FIFTY-TWO

served, but far more than he deserves, for the Author has already done the major part of the work.

I didn't mean that Hamlet was an easy part, but it's a hard one to kill.

The Intruder in *In the Night* is easier still, for almost any method would suit it.

Old Colley Cibber said: "Anything naturally written ought to be in everyone's way that pretends to be an actor."

He would have to revise his judgment if he were with us to-day or he would find himself most unpopular.

But even bad actors—who *are* actors—may do some things irreproachably that their peculiar method happens to fit; as the pianist who is more adroit at octaves than trills or finds the *staccato* touch easier than the *sostenuto*.

Also many an alleged genius robbed of his flamboyant eccentricity is revealed as a *poseur* and a fraud.

On Sunday I went to one of those theatrical Dinners at which everyone talks for publication and more insincerity is expressed even than in the Stage Gossip columns of our periodicals. My host landed me with the worst bottle of Burgundy (alleged Volny) it has been my lot to gustate for many years. Don't look for "gustate" in the dictionary. It was not his fault; though an excellent soul he takes a white-eye-lashed view of life, being by inclination a vegetarian and by necessity a Pussyfoot.

No, I wrong him; not that, for he is temperate. Pussyfoot is like Macaulay's Puritans who objected to Bear-baiting, not because of the pain inflicted on the bear but because of the pleasure enjoyed by the spectators.

Poor Z absorbs gaseous minerals by disinclination.

They say Rockefeller would give a few of his millions



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for a digestion. Z hasn't the millions but he has a better heart and a worse digestion than Rockefeller.

I wonder if you know this yarn about Rockefeller: Arrived at a small town in the early morning he asked for eggs and was charged a dollar a-piece for them. He remarked: "Seems like hens must be rare fowls in this ville." "No, *sir*," was the reply, "but millionaires *aire*."

But I was at dinner drinking vile Burgundy. The compensation was one of the most brilliantly witty speeches I have ever heard, even from McDonald Rendle. I am sure my headache next morning was due to excess of laughter.

What did you say?

Certainly not. Besides I didn't finish the second bottle—and I never touch liqueurs.

By the way, dear old R———was there, resplendent in white silk flowered waistcoat with gilt buttons; but I wish he hadn't worn a black tie.

I hope you enjoyed your motor trip. The weather was perfect, just as May ought to be and generally isn't. I was some time in the garden doing jobs I detest but the air was wonderful.

Tell Marie that flirting that does not deceive is savourless: if it does it is too cruel to be called amusement.

Who cares for a flirt? Reliability is the anchor of Love.

Miss L——'s hair was charming and the stray lock appeared as a pretty accident. Last time I saw her it had become an arranged effect—a deliberate affectation, neither pretty nor becoming. But she is a maiden of incurable respectability.

As for you, my dear Redgie, you are a born spendthrift—Yet, no; that is not the right word, Scattergift is your name.

## LETTER NUMBER FIFTY-TWO

What the Frenchman said was quite ridiculous and extravagant, mere Gallic politeness, which one takes with the grain of salt—as it is meant to be taken. Compliments always make me long to deserve them.

Your conclusion is irrefutable : the Artist is never satisfied. The moment self-satisfaction sets in Art decays. Put it to Instinct if you don't care to pay yourself the compliment of giving it to Reason.

As for your Essay ; take the praise and use it as a spur to fresh endeavour. You are in no danger of falling into conceit. You have done well and you are proud with that thankful humility that is an essential quality of a dignified and selfless pride, recognising the spiritual essence above and beyond mere individual control that makes it a great and worthy emotion. To rejoice in it with confidence is not conceit.

It is good to pay for benefits : it gives a sense of having deserved them. If our conduct towards others were influenced always by their conduct towards us we might have reason often to be heartily ashamed.

Still I have no work and I sit twiddling my almost worn-out thumbs. It seems useless, yet one must strive for employment ; though I have noticed that in our business when the job does come it usually presents itself accidentally while one is strenuously hunting in a totally different direction. I have faith that something will turn up and intelligent faith never slacks endeavour.

Independence in thought and action is man's crowning inheritance. I shall continue in my own old way, for certainly if my work is not wanted, pretending that it is other than it is won't create a demand.

One grows so used to the pain of disappointment that the

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joy of realisation is unbelievable. Yesterday is no longer possible, to-morrow futile.

Forgive me, I am squealing.

Some think the world a failure because Misery squeals. They forget that Happiness purrs almost inaudibly. The world is wonderful and beautiful. I hate the thought of leaving it.

Yours autumnally,



## LETTER LIII

London

19th February, 1920.

“Easy as falling off a log,” you say, Redgie ; and that’s very easy isn’t it ? You just—fall !

Quite so. It’s no more difficult than that.

But wait a moment. Have you ever tried it with the knowledge that at a given moment you must let go ? *Is* it so easy ?

There are a dozen ways of doing it—a hundred.

What effect is to be produced ? Is the tragedy of the accident to be accentuated ?—or the humour ? Is it to be a slide—a bump—a topple—a slip—or a crash ?

What is the best mechanism to employ in order to produce the maximum of effect consonant with an appearance of perfect naturalness ? Wait a moment and take thought. If it be really a natural accident the chances are about fifty to one against it seeming so. Yet that one-in-fifty chance may come off and you will get a huge lump of undeserved credit as being a great artist—though there will be diversity of opinion as to what really *is* effective—and even as to whether effect should be aimed at.

Further the question arises as to the capability of the judge—for all his didacticism—to decide justly, and whether—having regard to *his* qualities as an artist—his meed of praise or blame is worth consideration.

Again : the feat may be mere child’s play to you—to another it may require great effort of concentrated will power and a full equipment of technical skill. The qualified judge will sense all that.

But even yet we haven’t got at the root of the matter ; there are a dozen other things to be considered : the height of

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the log—the angle from which it is observed—the perspective in which it stands—the way it is lit and the sort of background it projects from ; all this will, unconsciously, influence the judge's verdict on *You*.

He will remark callously : “ Well—or ill done ! ” and that's all. He won't trouble to say *how* or *why* success or failure was achieved. Console yourself ; in most cases he does not know.

But who would be at the mercy of such, not only for bread and butter, but for that appreciation which is the artist's breath of life ?

Is it not amazing that any can still be found—not only willing, but anxious—to fall off logs ?

It is true that among the hundreds eager to attempt it because it is an easy way, they think, to earn a living, few are willing to discover the best way, since any way will do ; and as there is no standard the situation is distinctly deplorable.

We all love applause, but some few of us are critical of its quality. We want it for what we know is good and despise it as the reward of mere claptrap. We know we can win it by tricks (and some tricks deserve it) but it is not the tricks themselves but the way in which they are performed that should be the object of censure or applause.

The applause that discriminates—that rewards subtle preparation and skilfully applied technique—is the artist's most valued compliment. The burst of passion that seems real, the joyous note of comedy that rings true, the hysteria that is convincingly natural ; these are part of the equipment of the great actor.

Some modern critics will tell you that reserved—unexpressed emotion is the only genuine art. It is not true.

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The great artist can command that also ; it is a necessary corollary ; but the modern Reserved Force actor not only does not, but *cannot*—could not even though the scene required it—give us the outburst that on occasion the inspired author's text might demand.

I have written to you how Irving employed the three methods of *using* his personality—of *adapting* it—and of *subduing* it. Inevitably it showed through ; but though all his impersonations bore some resemblance to Irving, his Charles the First (for example) was unrecognisable in his Louis the Eleventh ; his Becket showed no trace of his Benedick.

But there is, as I also told you, a fourth method ; that of exploiting personality, and that is the one that the modern reserved force actors adopt and rely upon solely. I could give you the names of a whole string who do this and *nothing else*—the difficulty would be to name a few who do not.

Who sits on the edge of a table and lights a cigarette with such convincing naturalness as Gerald du Maurier ? Never, I suppose, has any actor achieved this graceful negligence with less strain or more consummate art. His *sang froid* is perfect ; his diction clear, concise, effortless ; his gesture apt, easy and illuminative ; all is so characteristically himself that any deviation from its distinctive *Du Mauriesquerie* would be resented by his million admirers, amongst whom I humbly count myself.

But attend : the villain in *The Ware Case* was excellent, and “excellent” is a very big word ; so is the performance in *Dear Brutus*, both are as thoroughly Du Maurier as Henry Beauclerc in *Diplomacy*. Unhappily, although Mr. Dearth might very well be Du Maurier—Barrie probably knew he would be and so designed him—Henry Beauclerc is quite a different person. As Algy Fairfax this particular



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manner would have been quite convincing but as characteristic of Henry Beauclerc, who is, to all intents and purposes, representative of the British Empire in Paris, it was quite the contrary.

Briefly the actor's problem used to be How to fit his Personality to the Part ; to-day it is How to fit the Part to his Personality—and very often he doesn't attempt even that, but just strolls through it haphazard.

And why should he not ?

It is far easier. Nobody raises the faintest objection. Critics expect it—even approve it. And the Public knows no better.

Unfortunately it doesn't happen to be Art—at least, not the Art of Acting.

You saw Ainley in *The Great Adventure*—No, it was before your theatre-going days. Well, you missed a very fine piece of impersonation. He adapted his personality, characterised, and gave us a finished study ; recognisably Ainley, but quite convincingly Ilam Carve.

But who got the bulk of appreciation and credit ? Wish Wynne, who, having a part perfectly composed and written, entirely sympathetic, was chosen because all she would need to do was to step upon the stage and be herself, which she did to admiration.

From the point of view of acting—that is to say of impersonation—there was no comparison between the two achievements. They were not on the same plane. To judge them together and say they were equally convincing is to hand an enormous bouquet to Ainley. He was acting and producing the effect of nature while Miss Wynne *was* nature. She was applauded for being simply and solely what she couldn't help being—what God had made her.

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And if, as some critics did, you judge them together to Ainley's disadvantage it is like going to the snake-house at the Zoo and giving the python a round of applause, while bestowing but grudging recognition on Michel Angelo for *The Laocoön* ; or cheering the sun for setting over Hampstead Heath and reluctantly approving Turner for *Dido building Carthage*.

Things that are on different planes can never meet and the Art of *Acting* cannot be compared with this new—well, Art, if you will, of Self-Exploitation, created by Pinero (whom I regard as the Judas of our Art, for he betrayed it by the kiss of Tanqueray) and fostered by Shaw, Barker, Galsworthy and their followers and imitators.

I have not the faintest intention by my references to pythons and Hampstead Heath to disparage Miss Wynne, for whose art, in her *métier*, I have the greatest admiration. Nor would I draw a parallel between Michel Angelo and Turner on the one hand and Henry Ainley on the other. Those great Artists were never content to rest on their laurels as Ainley has done, for since *The Great Adventure* he appears not to have troubled overmuch to impersonate. Ilam Carve was his top-notch. True, he gave us an adaptation of it in *Quinney's*. It was effective, and no doubt far less trouble than starting right at the beginning to study Joe Quinney from the inside. But Ainley can act, and I wish to Heaven he had not made so much money that he can now afford to act or not as it may please him.

## LETTER LIV

London

1st March, 1920.

I was at the first night of the revival of *The Admirable Crichton* at the Royalty Theatre a month ago.

Is it a fact that first impressions engrave themselves so indelibly upon the mind that it becomes incapable of receiving clearly the stamp of more mature judgment? and that, as consequence, the later images appear by comparison vapid and crude?

This comedy is one of the cleverest examples of sheer play-making I know; the technical skill that Barrie displays in its construction is extraordinary. Indeed so well is it made that the fact is not noticeable, but read it, or—better still—watch it in rehearsal and you will see.

The critics who abuse Sardou, who learnt his art from Scribe, would resent with bitterness the charge that Barrie had learned anything from either of those dramatists and would scout with scorn the scurrilous imputation (as they would regard it) that *The Admirable Crichton* is a well-nigh perfect example of the type they execrate—yet so it is. It is also many other things but *that* first.

You, however, are more interested in the acting and I am interested in that chiefly—and in this play especially—because the well-made play usually affords it the most striking opportunities.

One has few chances of comparing performances of the same part by different actors outside of the Classics. In public print it shows very bad manners to make such comparisons but I am no publicist.

I have seen performances that I have preferred to the



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originals, but I admit that *as good* is not good enough to seem so, and *better* must be, in fact, very much better.

I have given you my opinion of H. B. Irving's acting generally, but there is no denying that as Crichton he was fitted as with a glove.

The part asked no more than he could give with ease ; moreover it afforded him scope to offer his all with equal ease.

But this revival : Alfred Bishop, admirable actor as he is, was not happy as the Earl of Loam. But who could expect to efface recollection of Kemble in any character that he had made peculiarly his own. I wish you could have seen Bishop as Captain Cruickshanks in *Rosemary*. Kemble would have been at the same disadvantage there by comparison with Bishop.

John Astley's performance could not be compared with Du Maurier's perfect exposition of the Honorable Ernest's—and his own—idiosyncrasies.

But Dennis Eadie as Crichton ?

Eadie is a clever actor. So long as he confined himself to playing middle-aged *bourgeois* he was brilliant. He created a *genre*. Again and again he gave us remarkable studies ; in *Strife*, in *Irene Wycherley*, in *Diana of Dobson's* and many others I forget for the moment ; why did he give it up ?

No doubt the answer could be found in his bank-book.

He does not shine as a *straight* actor. I remember him in *Sally Bishop*—but that is beside the point. Yet I am sure I am not wrong in saying he should never have attempted Crichton.

And I wish Barrie had left “ excellent well ” alone and not altered the end of the play. I can picture H. B. now

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most clearly in the final episode. I had seen him previously to great advantage in *The Tree of Knowledge* at the St. James' but never was he so well suited as in *The Admirable Crichton*.

It was natural, I suppose, that he should take up his father's parts, especially Mathias. He had everything to help him technically and innumerable opportunities of studying his father's performance: the trouble was that he tried to reproduce his father—without the spirit!

I did not see *The Bells* in 1871 and had I done so I should not have been very capable of judging it; but when I did see it I knew it was no longer what it had been. I believe Irving was told that if he continued to act the part for all he and it were worth the strain would kill him.

Naturally. As I have said before, no artist can go on repeating himself without grave danger to his art. In the numerous revivals Irving played on technique, though probably two or three times in each run he would excel former record—and the next night fall well below it.

My friend Herbert Jarman, artist, actor, producer for Waller and others (he produced *Cyrano* for Loraine), Egyptologist and, during the War, aerial chronologist—I don't quite understand what his duties were but I know they were *individual* and *special*—told me that he had seen Irving as Mathias fourteen times and only once did he *act* it.

Similarly Jarman saw *The Lyons Mail* twenty-three times; we saw it together more than once. He said though Irving never failed to give full value in his beautiful performance of Lesurques, he was at the top of his form as Dubosc only four times. Yet that is a pretty good average when one considers the tremendous physical tension of such an impersonation.



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Irving was obliged, for commercial reasons, to give *matinées* ; at first his Company played only the *matinée* on Saturdays—for which he paid them a full extra salary—and he closed the theatre at night. The actors, you see, thus drew a salary and a sixth for the six performances.

I wonder what our present commercial managers would say to that !

Irving abolished Fines in the theatre—before his *régime* regulations were very strict and fines rigidly enforced for breaches of them—with the result that he earned a better loyalty, more punctuality and precision in business than any of his predecessors.

Actors in the bulk are queer folk—or were—more responsive and impulsively generous than the members of most callings.

How Irving managed to play Louis the Eleventh as I have seen him again and again, always “all out,” I can’t imagine. The scenes with Coitier and Nemours were amazing physical efforts yet I never knew him fail to rise to them.

As I think I told you Charles Kean was probably nearer to historical truth in his picture of the wily Valois, but Irving’s artistic truth was so convincing that you would have said had you seen him that so Louis must have been : and if he wasn’t—well, it was incredible that a lesser man should have so well and truly laid the foundations of what France was to become.

Again with Richelieu : historical research—edited by historians—state documents—interpreted in the light of what it has seemed diplomatic to record, ignoring much it was no doubt wisest to suppress—and alleged, though in some cases but half-authenticated fact have constructed for us a figure which it seems hardly credible to suppose could



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have carried to successful issue the work of Henri Quatre and Sully and paved the splendid way to France's future as the great Cardinal did.

The figure drawn by Bulwer Lytton that Macready created—in the sense that he acted it first—and into which Irving breathed a soul, with his ecstatic love of Country might have accomplished it.

Love is a greater force than mere scheming, cruelty, or tyranny.

That the events of the Day of Dupes should have been bound up with the fate of persons so insignificant as Julie de Mortemar and the Chevalier de Mauprat is, on the face of it, ridiculous. Yet the artistic truth of the dramatic situation *when properly acted* is more convincing than John Drinkwater's verbatim report of what Abraham Lincoln said at certain meetings of his cabinet in regard to the question of Black Slavery in the South. That was about as *true* as the "Chinese Slavery" catch-phrase in regard to South Africa—an excuse, though a brilliantly clever one, to enlist humanitarianism for a Cause that was purely political.

But *Richelieu*: Macready ringing the changes on his fate-sealed Werner manner, his *romantique* Claude Melnotte attitude and the ponderous humour of his Benedick, scored heavily in what was at that time an entirely new type of play.

The spiritual beauty of Irving's rapt devotion—that austerity proper to the priest, though no doubt lacking in this militant churchman, who was also so very markedly *chevalier des dames*—was no doubt at variance with ascertained fact, yet the whole effect of his picture of the warrior-statesman Cardinal-Duke was, I submit, nearer to Truth than

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such biographical analyses as dwell mainly on the petty human weaknesses of one whose gigantic intellectual stature so potently influenced world history.

Edwin Booth's Richelieu was no doubt kindred to Macready's. I am not likely to forget—impressive as he was—how he “sawed the air”—not “thus,” but with fingers crooked at right-angles to the palm in a progressive zig-zagging movement upwards to illustrate the lines:—

“While civilization on its luminous wings

“Soars phœnix-like to Jove.”

It made me think, as it has always done since, of the advertisement of the Phœnix Fire Insurance Company with the apochryphal bird perkily perched on the streaks of forked lightning.

But Booth's acting and his association with Irving when they alternated the parts of Othello and Iago is another and rather large subject.

I saw Irving neither in *Eugene Aram*, *Vanderdecken* nor as Philip of Spain in Tennyson's *Queen Mary*, renamed *Philip*. How wonderful he might have been as Philip the Second in a dramatic version of Marion Crawford's *In the Palace of the King*.

His Eugene Aram it is possible to reconstruct from a knowledge of Lytton's novel and Irving's performances of Mathias and Edgar of Ravenswood. I can picture it and I grieve that I missed it.

Vanderdecken. One knows the legend and Captain Marryat's grisly tale. I imagine Irving as the phantom ship-master—a mystic, nautical Hamlet. In such eerie creations he was inimitable—unapproachable.

Irving's performance of Macbeth gave rise to much controversy. It was inevitable. Hitherto Macbeth had



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been played always and only on the most robust lines. Elderly critics could accept no other view of the character. Taking into account the times, not only when the play was written but the period in which it is set the Viking type would seem the only possible. And yet—? No doubt there were such—must have been—and yet—and yet—it is not quite convincing.

Irving made a good case for his new reading. I did not see it until his revival in 1888 when Ellen Terry played Lady Macbeth. I was disappointed. The detail is blurred in my memory. I can tell you nothing that you cannot read of in one or other of the biographies.

His Shylock is more vivid in my recollection. Irving followed the Kean tradition. I can't accept it as the true one but that is mere individual opinion. I believe Irving invented the silent return of Shylock to his empty house after the flight of Jessica. It was worthy of him—a stroke of genius.

There was no snatching of his gaberdine from the clutch of Gratiano—as Kean had it—in the Trial Scene ; his dignity was superb. He was patriarchal ; and if he had not the organ-peal of Genesis in his voice, he had at least the impressive ardour and compelling earnestness of St. Paul.

If I have been so fortunate as to create for you any sort of mental picture of Irving you will know that his work excelled in two opposite qualities : it exuded a sweet aroma of goodness—an incense of chastity, I may almost say—on occasion and, at will, he could create by it an aura of wickedness which was at its most malignant when spiced with humour.

To illustrate these qualities in the man himself I will tell you an anecdote : Irving was, of course, pestered for



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engagements in his Company by every tag-rag actor with whom he had chanced to rub shoulders in his 'prentice days. One day came one to him begging for work on the plea that at one time they had shared a bed in humble lodgings. Irving referred him to Loveday, his stage-manager, and the old actor found himself in receipt of six pounds a week, no mean salary in the Eighties.

Production followed production but never was his name in the cast. Weary of his sinecure, he took to waylaying Irving whenever a new play or revival was announced and asked to be allowed to earn his salary. Each time Irving answered: "Ha! We must consult the author."

At last a revival of *Hamlet* was imminent and again Irving was waylaid and arrested stepping into his hansom at the stage-door:—

"Is there no part for me in *Hamlet*, sir?"

"Ha! We must consult the author."

"But, sir—*Hamlet*—Shakespeare—the author's dead."

"Ha! Well—we must respect his memory!"

Yours as ever,

## LETTER LV

London

14th March, 1920.

When Shakespeare wrote *Julius Cæsar* he drew the character of "the mightiest Julius" as a blatant fool and this he did of definite and set purpose. His aims were to magnify Brutus and to develop to the full his masterly conception of Marc Antony. He did not scruple to avail himself of the poet-playwright's privilege which allows that so long as he does not contradict his thesis within the limits of his work he may premise exactly as it may please him. That is the dramatist's licence.

Yet when W. G. Wills, for a similar purpose, presented Oliver Cromwell as "a mouthing patriot with an itching palm" never was heard such clamorous cawing in the critical rookery.

If Wills be condemned Shakespeare must not go scathless ; and, to say truth, there are those who condemn Shakespeare with equal vigour, though they do not pause to reflect how the whole fabric of the structure would warp and sag by alteration in the chiselling of the corner-stone.

In *Charles the First* Wills designed to obtain from his audience a maximum of sympathy for the Stuart Martyr and with the collaboration of his great protagonist he secured it.

The play is no great literary work ; the poetry was supplied more by the actor's temperament than by the poet's phrase, yet there are in it moments of great beauty.

Whoever heard the King's apostrophe to Moray as delivered by Irving.

"I saw a picture once by a great Master—"

.....

"Judas had eyes like thine of liquid blue.—"

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Whoever, I say, could listen to this speech unmoved—well, he was “fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils.”

The majesty of “Uncover in the presence of your King!” to Cromwell was transcendent. The velvet of humorous tolerance shrouding the steely sarcasm of “Who is this rude gentleman?” as Ireton’s presence, ignored till that moment in spite of his repeated interruptions, was at length recognised was inimitable.

Of the final leave-taking of the Queen it is not possible to speak. The curtain fell in silence and the audience would sit gasping — sobbing. A minute would pass that seemed like five, and then the thunder!

Yet so it was throughout the evening, the “lump in the throat” was never more difficult of ingurgitation.

Akin to this noble and beautiful performance was Irving’s creation of Doctor Primrose. I say *creation* deliberately. The play was not new. Hermann Vezin had already acted the part at the Court Theatre. The character, moreover, as presented by Irving, had many points of difference from Goldsmith’s somewhat bucolic parson. Irving—I have used the word before—“etherealised” it. The frail yet hearty old gentleman (oh, yes, essentially *that*) he pictured for us had a soul many sizes too large for his body.

Yet having said this of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, how shall I speak of *Becket*?

St. Thomas à Becket massacred on the steps of the Shrine of Canterbury!

The picture is before me—misty.

I see him at chess with King Henry—Terriss’ passionate King was a vivid picture of splendid virility—ascetic, thoughtful—power in repose! I see him in mitre and cope with uplifted crozier, towering above a sea of heads,



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dominant, hedged by sanctity—power in expression! I see him succumb under the assault of the Four Knights, fragile yet invulnerable, bleeding, fluttering as a stricken bird, dominant still—triumphant in death!

Wolsey, the worldly churchman, he lit with a spirit quite different.

York House and he sits in lonely state, his chin on his hand, the muscles of his jaw throbbing in perceptible rhythm to the music, those wonderful Three Dances of Edward German, which were Irving's favourite melodies.

His chin on his hand! Irving's hands! What a subject for a monograph!

In *Henry the Eighth* Terriss gave us a life-like portrait of Bluff Hal, as yet a tyro in matrimony. He did not make the mistake of presenting him as a gross old satyr as he has since been wrongly interpreted.

I was so presumptuous as to find only disappointment in Irving's production of *King Arthur*. He did not satisfy me as the King; temperamentally he would have been the ideal Launcelot.

This is to detract nothing from Forbes-Robertson's beautiful performance. I should have acknowledged gratefully his perfect reading of Buckingham in *Henry the Eighth*.

Ellen Terry was Guinevere and Lena Ashwell Elaine. Remembering her exquisite Fair Rosamund in *Becket* I know—as I knew before I had seen that—that Ellen Terry would have better realised my imagining of Elaine.

You see on this subject I am all perversity. I will leave it.

In *Punch* there appeared a caricature of Irving with this quotation: "Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

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This question Irving answered fully by his performance in Act V. Scene I. *A street in Mantua.*

I think I have seen fourteen Romeos : I have known that scene acted only by one of them and that one was Irving. It is true that the expression of youthful ardour which the Balcony Scene requires presented difficulties which Irving's physique accentuated. The flow of passionate utterance in that strain was foreign to his personality and only by great technical skill did he ultimately conquer the difficulties and reconcile the varying aspects and emotions of the character into a convincing and satisfying whole. But his scenes with the Friar and with the Apothecary were always superlatively good.

It was quite different in *Ravenswood* ; from the first the young laird was a performance as ideal in execution as in conception.

Of Robert Landry in *The Dead Heart* I could tell you much and of Victorien Sardou's plays, written especially for Irving and translated by his son Laurence, *Robespierre* and *Dante*, but I fear to repeat myself.

Hamlet, Charles the First, Benedick, Becket, Louis the Eleventh and Lesurques and Dubosc remain my favourites.

Of these last two—the dual rôles in *The Lyons Mail*—I have heard it objected that Irving made them too *dis-similar*—that it was a strain on the credulity to imagine that the other characters could confuse the two identities.

I do not admit this. If it were true it would constitute a grave artistic error. I conceive that Irving treated the problem with perfect skill yet it is a trap for the unwary actor.

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Do you know the true history of this *cause célèbre* in which justice has only recently been done by rehabilitating the memory of the innocent Lesurques, guillotined in 1792 ?

So it is in the original French play, *Le Courrier de Lyon* by MM. Moreau, Siraudin et Delacour, though even during its first run in 1850 an alternative ending was provided, the audiences at the *Théâtre de la Gaîté* objecting to the sacrifice of the innocent. The parts were played by that fine actor Lacressonnière who died comparatively recently and played Leads almost to the last.

Lesurques was in fact a burly flaxen-haired Norman ; Dubosc an under-sized swarthy Southern gaol-bird. After the robbery of the Mail-cart Dubosc and his gang adjourned to an inn and Dubosc put on a flaxen wig. A foolish kitchen-wench who had seen Dubosc's back only as he rode away, overawed by the *gendarmes*, swore away Lesurques' life because his hair was the same colour as Dubosc's wig.

I still search for work. I have been asked to produce a one act Thriller for a Special *Matinée* and that is all the definite employment in sight.

No more to-day, I look forward to your next. I shall spend the evening thinking of old Lyceum days. What an actor ! “ When comes such another ? ”

Yours,

*P.S.*—I forgot to tell you of Fabien and Louisdei Franchi, *The Corsican Brothers*. It is no matter. Another time if you are interested.

The spell of Great Acting sheds light in many curious senses : I think of Kean's art as the blazing sunlight—startling—blinding—



*LETTER NUMBER FIFTY-FIVE*

Irving's as the radiance of the moon at full, illuminating as the sun at noon, clear-cut by shadows—well-defined—firmly etched—

Sometimes glowing, burnished as the harvest-moon—lurid—

Sometimes misty—suggestive—ringed by a watery nimbus—weird—

Sometimes as star-light—pure, with a radiance, gentle and sanctified—Becket !

## LETTER LVI

London

30th March, 1920.

Did I read somewhere the other day that Carlyle was responsible for "Genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains?"

Surely not. It is so manifestly untrue.

It was he I know who said: "Genius is unconscious of its excellence," which is undeniable and a direct contradiction of the former. It is obviously impossible to "take pains" unconsciously.

It is for the plodder, and even for the talented, to "take pains," but genius achieves by inspiration what the others never attain, no matter how laboriously they strive.

There are those who say that there has never been and can never be Great Acting—that acting, being an interpretive not a creative art, can have no quality that may be called great.

But *is* acting merely interpretive?

What about inspiration?

Is there—or rather has there never been inspired acting? And may not inspired acting guided and controlled by technical skill be called creation when it reveals heights and depths and a thousand facets of the mentality never suggested by mere work-a-day performance?

Hazlitt said "it is we who are Hamlet."

And it is true that listening to mere recital of Shakespeare's words may so turn our eyes inward that we perceive in ourselves all the qualities exemplified in Shakespeare's creation.

Yet what of Irving's Hamlet, which disguised nothing of all that—and revealed something more?

Is not that "more" a thing of the actor's creation?

## LETTER NUMBER FIFTY-SIX

You may reply that there could be no “more” that the poet had not designed—that since the actor was able to express it he must have found the germ in the poet’s work.

Well, I will allow that in the case of Shakespeare; but what of the work of lesser—that is to say, *all the other* dramatists?

Again and again I have heard authors admit that performance showed depths and shades in their characters that they never dreamed were there. Have the actors, then, in those cases not created?

Compare Irving’s Doctor Primrose with Hermann Vezin’s—and Oliver Goldsmith’s. They vary to points of definite dissimilarity, yet all are vital. Is only the last creation?

What of *The Fool’s Revenge* which Tom Taylor wrote for Phelps, based upon Victor Hugo’s *Le Roi S’Amuse*? The points of difference between Bertuccio and Triboulet are so marked that they are indeed two separate characters—individual creations of individual poets.

Now compare Edwin Booth’s and Hermann Vezin’s performances of Bertuccio. One at least must have totally misrepresented the author’s intention yet both were credible—living suffering human beings, though as utterly unlike as Little Tich and Mr. Asquith.

It won’t do. The actor *does* create. The critic may not approve his creation and may therefore try to sneer it out of existence, but he can’t. It lives for those who see it.

It is given to but few actors to create impressively—to originate so vitally that their work is worthy to be called creation but great actors achieve it.

The jargon of the calling dubs mere first performance of a character “creation.” I allow it is too big a word, though it is not usually used in an arrogant sense.



## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

Acting is primarily an interpretive Art, but even so may it not be great ?

If interpretive art cannot be great there was never a great violinist. Yet Paganini is generally allowed to have been great.

Was he great when he performed his own compositions but less than great when he interpreted, with similar inspiration, the works of other masters ?

Is Paderewski a great pianist only when he plays his own works ?—or Kreisler ?

Suppose Shakespeare had himself acted Othello and given an inspired performance would not that performance have been great ?

Must we then deny the epithet to a similarly inspired performance by Burbage ?

I submit that any man who excels in his particular craft or art may be called great ; but I agree that the word is used too loosely and has lost much of its force and intention from too frequent and indiscreet usage.

There has been a small number of great actors of one or a few parts ; there have been two or three genius-interpreters in the history of the Stage.

The Art of Acting is and always must be more important in the Theatre than the dramatist's Art. For thirty years the dramatist—and producer—have swamped acting with most lamentable results, for to-day we search in vain for a single actor capable of giving what may be justly termed a great performance.

We can only hope for a new era, when, conditions having changed, Impersonation may once again become the all-important interest of the Theatre—when cranks no longer select puppets to expose what they conceive to be the author's

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intentions or warp the obvious to their crankiness. The Theatre may then reassert itself and a great art regain proper esteem.

The acting temperament is generated in the irresponsible, irregular, irrational bohemian strain that may be in us. Education ruins it by teaching it self-consciousness. The best actors are by no means the most intellectual. Mimicry is not an intellectual accomplishment but an instinct; and though mimicry of a soul may require a higher type of instinct than the guttersnipe's mimicry of the Peeler on his beat it is only a development of the same art.

Your Rachels, Terrys, Keans, Irvings, Lemaîtres, Mélingues are born ready-made actors and need only the polish of experience to expose in perfection the brilliant facets of their art.

Of those—the only great ones I can recall, unless I include Burbage (for I put Talma, Coquelin, Booth, Bernhardt in a different category)—none sprang from particularly refined or intellectual surroundings.

I have said Kean was the greatest Actor since the Restoration and so I believe, though he lacked the full equipment of the ideally great. This I take to consist of three elements: Tragic Force, Humanity, and Sense of Humour; all these reconciled and inspired by an intuition so sensitive that it forestalls and directs the sentience of the mass before it—for remember, the actor never obtains his effect *independently* of his audience but always *in co-operation* with them so that he is forced to vary his method from night to night in order to appear to obtain the same result.

By Tragic Force I mean not only strength in bearing and the intensity of unshakable conviction but the weight of that true dignity that is bred of Reverence. Pity and

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Terror are the children of Veneration. The Father punishes; recognising His Justice we compassionate the weakness that has deserved castigation and shudder in the knowledge of our kindred guilt.

Humanity. The majesty of great tenderness.

“Your gentleness shall force

“More than your force move us to gentleness.”

Sympathy. That understanding which implies suffering, not the pangs of disappointed vanity but the pain that can be learned only in seeing a loved one suffer.

Observation of the griefs and foibles of others.

Whether it is necessary to have been drunk in order to simulate drunkenness is a large question. In argument it might be carried *ad absurdum*; for example: whether it is necessary to have died in order to simulate the act of dying.

I shall return to this question of drink.

The great actor is intuitive, he practises a form of self-hypnosis in his portrayal of those emotions and weaknesses which may be alien to his own humanity, but to strike these chords convincingly he must first ring the tuning-fork which sounds the key-note of Sympathy.

The Sense of Humour; that is, the sense of proportion; or at least each is part of each and both are essential to the actor. Proportion as it affects gesture, that is to say all illustrative comment—what is *fit*. Humour as it affects diction and emphasis, tonal values, pause, *crescendo*, and climax.

Kean had this last—nearly, by instinct. As Macready said: when he failed to grasp the root idea of a character *instantly* by intuition he could not master it by study.

I do not believe that great acting is ever the result of a



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laborious process of psychological study. The light that filters into the brain *by degrees* will never flood it to inspiration, it is the metcoric flash of sudden revelation that irradiates—illumines nooks, corners and crannies that even sunlight never penetrates.

Yet it is often part of an actor's work to reconcile false psychology in a character—to blend strange elements and make them seem convincingly parts of one whole. It is one of the most fascinating aspects of the Art. It means often first night failure for the actor who gets the blame that is properly the author's, but it is one of the things that makes a long run tolerable, and critics—if they knew—might give praise on the hundredth performance where they had nothing but censure for the first.

I have a shrewd suspicion that there was never a really great actor who did not drink too much. I don't mean get drunk habitually or even often, but make up, to some extent, alcoholically, for the exhaust of spirit that is inevitable in playing a great scene. You may answer that material spirit (*sic* ?) could not replace the waste of the ethereal.

I can't argue it. I feel that I might myself have been a better actor if I were a better drinker—or a worse ; just as you regard it. Alcohol lifts the ratchet and lets the wheel spin freely : too much and the ratchet will not drop and catch control of the wheel again at the right moment.

Do not imagine that I think alcohol can or ever could make up for lack of ability, experience, technique, inspiration or any other essential quality. It won't supply what is not there, but it will heighten and spur abilities that are present and I do most emphatically affirm that applied to the right temperament at the right moment it will assist to its highest expression of certain effects ; for example,

## LETTERS OF AN UNSUCCESSFUL ACTOR

the climax of *Othello*, Act III, certain scenes of *Macbeth* and *Lear*—and do the actor no harm, for its effect is dissipated in his effort.

The picture of Kean with his bowl of boiling brandy in the wings is deplorable. To him it became a necessity in order to act at all. And the craving did not stop there, for he grew to need its impetus both before and after each effort.

Disastrous !

The juice of the grape is a good servant : use him—or surely it should be her—with discretion. She is the ideal mistress, but a hell of a wife.

What is Great Acting ?

As I understand it is an exposition of some deep emotion or devastating passion so poignantly convincing that the public are lifted out of themselves and realise their surroundings only when the actor leaves the stage or the curtain shuts him from their sight, when—to use Kean's expression—"they rise at him !"

There are tricks well known to old actors by means of which *something* of this effect can be created ; and when I say "tricks" I mean what may be called an illegitimate use of technique which the discerning will very readily detect. But I am assuming, for the purpose of my definition, that the occasion is a legitimate one deliberately designed by the dramatist for the actor to use and that the actor by his skill, his temperament and his personality uses it to the full.

One day I will tell you of the great performances I have seen and why they live with me still.

No doubt in time a new art form will evolve to take the place of Great Acting but it will not fill the void any more than the motor-charabanc replaces the stage-coach. True

## LETTER NUMBER FIFTY-SIX

that it “ gets there ”—quicker and on better springs—but the speed is no compensation to the lover of horses. The modern cosmopolitan hotel is no substitute for the old fashioned English hostelry. What is to-day called Beer sits ill on the stomach of the lover of Brown October. The sophisticated concoction of logwood that is called Port does not compare with the '47 of my youth.

Yet it is true that in place of most things we have lost we have something that “ will do ” and I suppose the present acting “ does ” for the present generation.

My view is that the present generation has “ done for ” Acting.

I long to see the sparks fly.

Central heating is a good thing—for corridors, ante-chambers, offices and restaurants, but who dares pretend it could ever take the place of the log-fire on the open hearth ?

Yours,





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